



BRANCHING OUT

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I came across a story this week about a seven year old boy named Alex. He apparently attended a church that met in an actual church building. One Sunday morning, the pastor noticed him in the foyer of the church, just staring at this big plaque they had on the wall. The plaque was covered with names and had a small American flag on either side of it. Alex was mesmerized by it, trying to read all the names. The pastor said, "Good morning Alex." He said, "Good morning, pastor. Can you tell me what this is?"

The pastor said, "Sure. That's a memorial plaque we put up to remember all the young people who have died in the service."

Alex was quiet a long time, just looking at it. Then he asked, "Which service – the 8:30 or the 11:00?"

I'm happy to tell you that so far, in every family service we've had at New Day, all the kids have survived! They may seem a little long sometimes, but if you're able to hang with me today, kids, I've got a reward for you afterwards that will be way better than having your name on a plaque.

As I'm sure you've figured out by now, today is Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday marks the beginning of what is known as Holy Week – the last days of Jesus' life leading up to his crucifixion.

Have any of you been using our Journey to Jerusalem Lent calendar this year? We made it in the form of a path for moving your donkey along. Each day's verse is a new stone in the path. Part of the reason we did that was to draw attention to what Jesus was doing in the weeks and months before his death. Because he was on an intentional journey toward Jerusalem.

Luke 9:51

As the time drew near for his return to heaven, he moved steadily onward toward Jerusalem with an iron will.

He's had one goal, and nothing was going to distract him from it. So when he finally arrived in Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, it was a big moment, something he had put a great deal of thought into.

With that in mind, it's worth our time to look at what happened and see what it all means.

The story of Palm Sunday, or the Triumphal Entry is told in each one of the four books about Jesus' life: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Each one brings their own unique perspective to what happened. For our purposes this morning, I want to look at what John had to say about it.

John 12:12-16

The next day the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting,

"Hosanna!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Blessed is the King of Israel!"

Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written,

*"Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion;
see, your king is coming,
seated on a donkey's colt."*

At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him.

I think this scene is one of the most interesting in the Bible. Everything seems to have happened so intentionally, from Jesus sending his disciples for the colt, to the waving of branches to the words people chanted. And at the same time, it seems so short lived. The people acted like he was a hero riding into town, then just a few short days later the city would turn against him and have him killed. So you scratch your head and wonder what happened. Were they all misguided? Did they think Jesus would be something different than he was and this was all a big mistake?

Obviously, I don't believe it was. In fact, I think this is one of the best places in the Bible to see how God weaves history together to make a powerful statement. Jesus' ride into Jerusalem is so unusual and so full of symbolism that it gives us all kinds of ways to talk about God's big plan.

And we've covered many of them in the past. We've talked about the donkey. We've talked about the kids who were part of the day. We've talked about the word Hosanna. The junior higher even just told us about the coats that people placed on the road to make something like a red carpet for Jesus to ride on.

This morning I want to talk about the most obvious element of all on Palm Sunday: the palm branches. John tells us people were carrying these as they went out to meet Jesus. Matthew and Mark tell us they were cutting them down off the trees and laying them on the road with all the coats. These branches show up everywhere.

What's up with the branches? On the most basic level, they're like flags or pennants you see people wave at a ball game or parade. They've been used that way in the middle east for thousands of years, and they're still used that way today. It was the cultural thing to do when you were celebrating something big.

But something else struck me that made me think these branches are especially significant in this story, because they serve as a reminder of a deeper truth.

Have you ever done a dot to dot picture, where you can't quite see what it is you're drawing until you connect them all? That's the kind of picture these palm branches give us. So hang with me here for a minute because I want to connect some dots. We just got through talking about the book of Ruth for the past three weeks. It ends off with Ruth and Boaz getting married and having a baby boy, and here's what one of the last verses of that book says about him:

Ruth 4:17

And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Now, draw a line from that over to the book of Matthew, where we're given a list of Jesus' human ancestors. Guess who shows up right in the middle of it?

Matthew 1:5-6

*Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth,
Obed the father of Jesse,
and Jesse the father of King David.*

So Jesus' family line goes directly to these people. Why is that important? One more line to draw, back to the prophet Isaiah, who lived several hundred years before Jesus. He predicted this:

Isaiah 11:1-5

*A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.*

A BRANCH! A special branch would come from Jesse's family tree. Kids, I know in Sunday School your teachers will talk about the one thing to remember each week. Well here's the one thing for this morning: Jesus is the Branch. Every time you look at a palm branch, I want you to remember that Jesus is the Branch. Here's what Isaiah said about this Branch:

The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him —

*the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of power,
the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD —
and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.*

*He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;
but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.
He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.*

Isaiah foresees the time when God's Messiah, Jesus would come and be a different kind of king. He would make things right in the world.

Now just in case you're skeptical and you think it was an accident that Isaiah referred to this future person as a branch, let's look at one more verse. Jeremiah, who was another prophet who lived several hundred years before Jesus, was saying something very similar to Isaiah.

Jeremiah 23:5

*"For the time is coming," says the Lord,
"when I will place a righteous Branch upon King David's throne.
He shall be a King who shall rule with wisdom and justice
and cause righteousness to prevail everywhere throughout the earth.
And this is his name: The Lord Our Righteousness."*

Again, he's called a branch. Again, he's a different kind of king with a different kind of kingdom that has worldwide influence. And Jeremiah goes so far as to tell us that this king is The Lord our Righteousness. He is Jesus. Jesus is the Branch.

Have you ever gone to a game where the fans hold up signs to show their support? They don't just hold up blank pieces of paper. People put pictures and messages and team colors on their signs that have meaning, pictures and messages that make a statement about their favorite player. They are showing support for that individual or team.

The people waving branches as Jesus rode into Jerusalem are doing more than just shaking leaves like blank pieces of paper. They are holding up something that is a symbol. As they cheered, "Hosanna – save us," They were saying, "You're the branch. These are your colors. This is a picture of you. You're the king we've been waiting for."

Calling Jesus the Branch is one thing. Knowing what that means is another. Jesus is called many different picture words in the Bible. Can you think of any? He's the Good Shepherd. He's also the Lamb of God. He's the Bread of Life. He's the Living Water.

He's the Way. He's the Rock. He's the Gate. Each one of those titles tells us something about who he is and what he does. And calling him The Branch is no different. We can get to know more about Jesus if we think about what that title might actually mean.

First of all, what is a branch? How would you describe it to somebody who had never heard the word before? Probably the main feature of a branch is that it is connected to and growing out of something else. A branch is a one with the tree, and it's the part that extends out from the center. I like to think of it this way:

A branch is a trunk making room.

Jesus told a story when he was teaching that I think gives us another dot to connect to. He was explaining the kingdom of God to people, and he said this:

Mark 4:30-32

Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade."

You can see all these birds flocking to this giant tree. When I've read this parable before, I've always focused mostly on how small the seed was rather than on how big the branches are. But it is the branches that become the centerpiece to the story, because the branches are what makes it possible for the birds to find a home.

To illustrate, I need a volunteer for a minute. I'd like you to just stand here for a minute with your hands straight down at your sides. Let's say this is how trees grew, maybe coming to a point at the top. Now let's say a bird comes along and tries to build a nest. There's maybe room for one, and even that is iffy.

Now stretch your arms out to your sides. Those nice long limbs make room for all kinds of birds to come and settle in. There's a spot for them now where there wasn't before.

I see Jesus as being the branches in his own tree story. He is totally connected to God the Father like a branch is to a tree. He told his disciples,

John 10:30

I and the Father are one.

And as that branch, he's the only way we can relate to God. Jesus said straight out,

John 14:6

No one comes to the Father except through me.

He is God's way of making room. Without Jesus, there's no good way for us to find a home in God.

If you took a survey of random people in the mall and asked them if they think they'll go to heaven someday, I can tell you how most people will respond. They'll see they think so. And when you ask them why, they'll say, "I've been a pretty good person. I try to do the right thing most of the time." But relying on our own good behavior to get to heaven is not good enough. God is too perfect. Even the best of us aren't perfect, so it's like trying to stay on the top of that pointy tree. Eventually we fall off. The bar for being good enough to get into heaven that way is too high.

But God wanted to make a way for us to be in his family. He loves us and wants to be accessible. So he sent Jesus. And since Jesus is both God and human, he gives us a connection that wasn't there before, and when we come to God through him, we find a way to have a relationship with him. When we think of Jesus as the branch, we can have hope, because a branch makes room. And there is plenty of room for you and me to come to God when we believe in Jesus.

Sticking with Jesus' story, he says that the birds of the air come and perch in this tree. Why do birds of the air need to perch in a tree? I need another volunteer. Could you flap your arms like a bird for me? Excellent. Now keep flapping, but stand on your tip toes. Now lift one of your feet. Now the other one. Just kidding.

What's the point? It's hard to be a bird! Flying around in the sky is great, but you can't keep yourself up there forever. It's tiring. So you need something that can support your weight. You need something that's not going to slip out from under you or let you sink. So another thing we can say about a branch is that **a branch is a solid place to land.**

One time I went swimming in the ocean, and I got out way too deep. I'm not a super strong swimmer, and I was tired. I could see how far away the shore was and I was just sure I couldn't make it back there without passing out. And I started to feel this panic creep in. Of course when you panic in the water, things only get worse. I didn't know what to do.

But then, all of a sudden, my toe touched a rock. And all the fear went away, because I had found something solid. I knew then and there that I would make it.

We all need something we can count on in life. But when it comes right down to it, there is not much that is truly solid in this world. Everything changes. People and schools and jobs and moods and styles and opinions and abilities are always shifting. If you look to any of those things to define your life and what you're about, the minute things change, you start to feel very insecure and shaky. You don't know what you can count on.

You can always count on Jesus. I saw an interview this week with a man from Australia named Nick Vujcic. Nick is 26, and he has no arms and no legs. But he is one of the most powerful speakers I've ever heard. Having no limbs has made him learn to trust God in ways you and I will never know, and he's had opportunities to go all over the world, talking to people about how the only thing that gives him hope is Jesus.

He said one time when he was speaking in India, a woman came up to him afterwards and told her story. She had been sold into slavery as a child, living a horrible life. Then she became so sick that her owner through her out on the street. It's bad enough to be a slave, then to be fired from being a slave is about as low as you can get.

Then she came and heard Nick, and the message of Jesus dying for her and loving her gave her hope and changed her life. It was the first solid thing she ever knew. And as Nick thought about her afterwards, he said, "What else is there? There is nothing else. If there is an absolute truth and you don't believe in Jesus Christ, you tell me what it is and it better work for me, a man with no arms and legs, and it better be able to work for someone dying of cancer in the hospital, it better work for the orphan in Africa and it better work for a former slave in India."

The truth of Jesus is sure and solid no matter who or where you are. He loves you. He was willing to give up his own life for you and me so we could have life here and with him forever in heaven someday. Once you invite him into your life, he will never ever leave you. And he will help you in whatever you face. Those are rock solid truths.

The author of Hebrews said this:

Hebrews 6:19

We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.

You can search the world over, but you will not find another source of hope that is stronger and surer than Jesus. When we think of Jesus as a branch, we can think of him as that solid place where we can land and rest.

Jesus said in his story that the birds of the air would come and rest under the shade of the branches. Another character quality we can see is that **a branch is waterproof sun block.**

Part of what branches are designed to do is offer protection – in both the scorching heat and the big rainy storms. You can hide away under a leafy shield.

Going back to the prophet Isaiah, he said this:

Isaiah 4:2, 5-6

In that day the Branch of the LORD will be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land will be the pride and glory of the survivors in Israel...over all the glory will be a canopy. It will be a shelter and shade from the heat of the day, and a refuge and hiding place from the storm and rain.

You can run into a lot of bad weather on the road through life. Some situations can have you really feeling the heat as if the sun is beating down on you with no relief. And sometimes the storms just won't let up. In those times, Jesus is like a branch of protection over us.

When the devil wants to whisper lies in our ear that we're no good and God couldn't really love us, Jesus covers us with the truth that nobody can snatch us out of his hand.

When fear and anxiety pelt us like rain and we feel all alone, Jesus comforts us with his promise that he will never leave us or forsake us.

When we can't understand why we're going through a rough circumstance, one thing we can know is that Jesus has placed himself between us and the storm. He is never indifferent to our pain – he's taking the brunt of it as he shelters us.

What weather are you going through right now? We can come under Jesus' protection by praying and asking him to be the branch that covers us. We can say, "Jesus, I need some shade right now from _____". He won't always make the weather go away, but he will always walk through it with us.

One final thought I'd like to leave you with about a branch is that **a branch is a source of strength**. There is something going on inside branches that you can't see at first, but that eventually comes out. Take a look again at Isaiah 11:1:

Isaiah 11:1

*A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.*

Apples and oranges don't grow in the produce section at Fred Meyer. They come from trees with branches. Branches are where fruit grows. They are like fruit factories. Fruit is food and food is strength. When we say that Jesus is the Branch, we are also saying that Jesus is the one who supplies the spiritual food we need to have strength for life. Many of you have that great verse as your favorite verse in the Bible:

Philippians 4:13

I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

That strength can come in the form of courage when we're feeling afraid. It can come in the form of energy when we're too tired to keep going. It can come in the form of faith when we've been feeling wavery or encouragement when we're feeling down.

One of the best ways to find strength in Jesus is by reading his Word. When he was being tempted out in the desert, the devil knew he was hungry and tried to get Jesus to do a little miracle and turn some rocks into food for himself. Jesus told the devil this:

Matthew 4:4

Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.

God's word is a huge source of strength for us. How many of you here, when you've been going through a rough time, have done one of those "open the Bible anywhere and

see what it says” moves? Did you find a verse that helped you? Now that may not be the best way to read the Bible, but when even random reading of it can be life changing, you start to see that something is going on with this book. It has strength oozing out of every page.

Prayer is another way we find strength through Jesus. We simply talk to him about what we’re going through and ask for what we need. That’s why Paul wrote to the Philippians and said:

Philippians 4:6-7

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

And we can also strengthen each other. We can encourage each other and help each other and pray for each other. When you put your faith in Jesus, God gives you the Holy Spirit. That means we have his own power within us. And guess what? Once we have Jesus’ Spirit living in us, we’re connected to the tree ourselves. And Jesus said:

John 15:5

Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit.

In Jesus, we become branches. When you see branches on Palm Sunday, I hope it’s a reminder that will not only make you think, “Jesus, I need you to be my Branch.” But also, “Jesus, I want to be a branch that bears fruit for you, too.”

I want to send you home with a little assignment on this Palm Sunday. I’ve got some cards we’re going to pass around. On one side they say our one thing to remember which was Jesus is the Branch. On the reverse side, they list out the four things we’ve talked about this morning. As you look them over, think about which quality of a branch you’re most needing from Jesus right now.

A branch is a trunk making room. Have I made that connection with God through Jesus?

A branch is a solid place to land. What am I building my life on? Can it support all the weight of life? Will it hold up under tough times?

A branch is waterproof sunblock. Where do I need protection? What’s the storm in my life right now?

A branch is a source of strength. Where am I turning to fill my tank?