

Palm Sunday
March 28, 2010

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“And they brought the colt to Jesus and throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus upon on it and as he rode along they spread their cloaks on the road.” Several years ago as my clergy friends and I prepared for our Palm Sunday sermons, one friend made a comment which continues to haunt me. He said “Every year when I read the gospel account of Palm Sunday I think once again that I wish it were remembered as *cloak Sunday*.” The crowd’s active homage spreading their cloaks on the ground was more than symbolic. They were letting go of that one possession which every person needs as they demonstrated their excitement, their joy, their anticipation of the mighty deeds their messiah would continue to perform after entering the Holy City. So they made the sacrifice of a necessary garment. Imagine the difference in how we might perceive this Holy Day were we to observe “Cloak Sunday” instead of “Palm Sunday”; if we were to reenact the throwing of our own coats into a dusty or muddy road to be trodden upon by a donkey and a hoard of excited people instead of holding a palm, a green branch which grew far away from Portland in a far distant climate. Instead of waving our exotic palms, we would be preparing to heave a coat into the mud. The action of sacrificing our coat would be I suppose a festive action. But more than throwing expendable greens which quickly grow anew, our hope in the messiah finally arrived in our lives would result in actual sacrifice on our parts. We would give up a necessary garment to express joy, to express hope. As the man who would be king rides towards us on the colt of an ass, we would take off our top coats and lay them on the road in front of him -- just imagine! Now for some of us this poses a difficult dilemma – how would I decide *which* coat to sacrifice? Should I throw down my new “dress-up” winter coat that I wear for holidays and parties, the one with the fake fur around the neck? Or should I give up my bright red raincoat, which I wear constantly all fall, winter and spring here and about which people often comment – “I like your red coat”. My choice of red – a cheery color – is purposeful during the gray rainy days we experience here in the Pacific Northwest. It feels a ray of brightness amidst the gray. Or should I throw my winter parka into the road? – a garment I thought I’d not need when I

moved here from Vermont, but which I wear every time I head into the mountains for snow-shoe jaunts on wintery days. Which coat would you throw under the donkey's legs? Are some of you also fortunate enough to own several coats? Or are you like most of the people in the world? Your one coat is all you have and therefore for you to sacrifice looms large. My clergy friend's musing, his wondering why we Christians have been determined to ignore the laying down of garments to focus on branches of palms instead leaves me to wonder as well. Palms are certainly easier to replicate; they're cheaper, but what could it be that perhaps makes it deeper than that. When I think about it I believe palms are disconnected from us which makes it easier and since they grow back and next year our altar guild will simply order more -- where's the sacrifice? Would I throw down my aunt's aunt black velvet opera coat, lined in rich red velvet. Our coat is part of us; its fibers bear the very heat of our bodies; without a cloak we take one step closer to those who are truly needy. Coats express our personalities. My velvet opera cloak-- it's just right for a night at the opera -- I've worn it about once in three years, but I wouldn't let it go, would I? My red rain coat -- I refuse to be daunted by constant rain. My winter parka -- my snow shoe adventures are high points of Oregon winters. Our coats will not just grow back again if we give them away -- ready for us to wear again soon, then throw once more into the road next year. Were we to re-enact casting our cloaks under the hooves of a dancing donkey each year, it would feel like a sacrifice, wouldn't it? So we have made it easy for ourselves to observe Palm Sunday. We observe Palm Sunday at no cost. We've made the first part of this service, the part before the passion reading fun and festive and sacrifice is not a part of the script. This same clergy friend told us a memorable story of a Palm Sunday service which he said he would never forget, nor would any of us who heard the story. His words: "the festive early spring worshipers gathered outside and merrily followed a palm laden cross into church. When they arrived inside they found a man dressed as Judas Iscariot constructing a cross in the center aisle of the church. He continued hammering throughout the entire service, through each hymn, through the sermon, through the entire liturgy. When people went forward for communion they were invited to hammer their own nails into the cross and many did and found themselves weeping or raging or laying their anguish before God. My colleague told us that it was the most disturbing liturgy he had ever planned or attended and he told us that he suspected that it ended up close in spirit to the chaos of the original cloak Sunday. He concluded his story; one friend -- a wise and wonderful parishioner, not one of the perpetual complainers, said to him afterward "Please, don't ever do that

again; it cut too close. Please don't ever do that again; it cut too close. Think with me dear friends, how might we experience cloak Sunday? The Sunday of the passion, so that indeed it cuts close?