

Sunflowers. I was told they are easy to grow. But for 2 summers I tried. And I failed. I am not sure what happened, but I think either the bunnies ate them, I mowed them down while cutting grass, or they just didn't grow well in the soil.

But last year – I babied those sunflowers. Starting them late enough in the spring – direct sow in the ground – just as the package says. I made precise measurements to the depth of the seed. I fenced them in. I watered meticulously, not too much or too little. I fertilized. And they grew, and grew. 75 days was the anticipated growth until full bloom. It was long...but worth it.

Sunflowers are an amazing sight. I love how high they grow. I love their color.

I love especially how they turn, and stretch...toward the light, toward the warmth.

Toward the joy. Sunflowers make me happy.

Lent is a lot like those sunflowers, turning from darkness to light. We spend five weeks reflecting on our confession and repentance, our mortality, our darkness, our sin – in preparation, in hope of the promise of forgiveness, resurrection.

We spend this time in dark, because we anticipate and expect the light of Easter to be upon us. We turn, we stretch, we yearn for the alleluias that are coming...

But were not there yet.

Palm Sunday – doesn't it feel like a celebration?

"The whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God" – that is the whole crowd not just the 12. Any and all followers of Jesus.

Zacchaeus was probably up in front. Along with the formerly blind man from Jericho. Remember their encounter with Jesus changed their lives forever. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James must have been there for they'll be remembered by name at the empty tomb. And definitely Mary and Martha, and Lazarus. The list could go on.

This is a party, the crowning – the high point of the year, they were headed for the Passover. They are in the mood to celebrate. We should join them.

Wave our branches, throw our cloaks on the ground – and boldly proclaim – Hosanna in the Highest! (at least in theory) – some of us show more of a half-hearted response...me included.

After years, and years – generation after generation, the disciples and crowds following Jesus, have been waiting... lost in dark Lenten places – they wanted the promise of the Messiah to reign true. They believe Jesus is the Messiah, even if they probably saw a different sort of ruler in Jesus, but they still held out hope that he would defeat the Empire.

They would do anything to celebrate this long expected, long awaited king. They didn't care if he was riding humbly on a colt – instead of a thoroughbred stallion. Jesus! Hosanna...in the highest! Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord. The feast is about to begin! And we're ready!

After the Lent journey – we want the glory and joy – we want Easter...but it's not here yet. We still have to wait...what we get on this Palm Sunday is a short-lived glimpse of that glory.

Then it is back to the darkness.

If you came for the parade of palms – I'm sorry.

The celebration quickly dissolves into sadness. We see some light, but as soon as we turn towards that warmth – it is gone. Replaced with a rebuke from Jesus. And we know the darkness that is coming... the overturned tables in the temple, Last Supper, betrayal, denial, trials, mocking, beating, spitting, rejection, pain, a cross, an execution...

We will taste death. We will live out silence.

I'd rather have the sunflowers.

I want the end, I don't want the journey. I want resurrection – without death. I want peace, without pain. I want joy, without sorrow. I want victory, without defeat. I want redemption, without suffering. I want reconciliation, without confession. I want good, without the bad. I want Easter, without Holy Week.

But we know life rarely – okay never - works that way. God doesn't call us to a life of luxury and easy living. It is the hard, sorrowful, dark cycles and patterns of life – that truly are life giving.

God doesn't cause pain and suffering, but God's presence through it helps us, teaches us, strengthens, us prepares us. Experience the darkness, helps us to celebrate the light fully.

We believe that happiness in life = God loves us.

But in periods of darkness, when we are most reliant on God, we experience God's love in powerful ways.

This Holy Week, is more like Holy Hell Week.

Very little is good or holy or beautiful or happy about it.

It is the worst week for Jesus, but God's presence never failed. Jesus could only walk this week, because of God, and God's calling. Jesus follows God's call wherever it would take him, even to the nails of the cross.

As much as the sunflowers stretch out for the light, they begin in darkness – in the soil. They break through the shell of the seed, and poke out of the ground. They are drowned, blown by the wind, scorched by heat, but they hold strong, and they reach to the heavens. And as good as the light is for these flowers – they also rest at night, so that they are ready to face the next day.

As beautiful as sunflowers are, they don't last forever. At the end of the summer, when the tops were here, and the stems became petrified wood – I dug them out...they were dying. I hauled them to the dump. Sunflowers love the light, but they begin and end in darkness. So do we.

But we have faith that our darkness is never final.

Palm Sunday is only a celebration – because we believe the promise that next Sunday holds.

But we can't skip there yet. This is a busy week ahead of us. But necessary. It's a dark week...but it ends, and next week begins.