

Disciplines of Readiness: Go
Isaiah 55:12

Objections to the Palm Sunday parade, spoken during late night planning sessions, offered here in no particular order:

- No one will come. You think people love parades, but in fact, everyone will be busy with other things that morning. I know it.
- The Romans will shut us down in a minute. They don't like this sort of thing.
- This isn't professional enough. We should wait until we have the funding to do it right, not rush just because people want it now. It feels kind of hokey to me.
- It's going to be more expensive than you think. And aren't parades kind of a waste of money? They only last a day, half a day—and then you've got all those palm leaves strewn all over the streets, and overflowing trash cans; and it will all have to be cleaned up. It's going to be a big mess.
- It'll feel silly, Jesus riding on a donkey. What's the point? If we have legitimate complaints, shouldn't we just write a letter to the governor instead?
- This will never work. Whatever it is we think we're trying to accomplish here, it is never going to work. It is what it is.

I can hear each of those objections in my mind, because I have heard them before. I've probably made them before, when someone has suggested that we do something driven by our hearts, an event that seems fanciful, or excessively hopeful.

We adult humans have sharpened our 'realism' skills to a fine point. We can predict failure long before it appears. One of the articles we read in the *Flourishing in 2021* series referred to our brains as 'human prediction machines'.¹ That's how adults often use their brains: to think in advance of all the reasons what we hope for will not work out; to anticipate all the ways things might go wrong.

Maybe this is why the Palm Sunday story unfolds the way it does. If you've ever read this story in the New Testament, you know that Jesus' instructions for the set-up of the parade were very specific, almost oddly so. He tells the disciples what street corner to go to to find the donkey he'll ride on, what they should say to the donkey's owner, where to take the donkey after that, exactly how Jesus will ride. Clearly Jesus had a picture in his head of what this event should look like. It's like he was coaxing the disciples to help him with it by breaking this big, un-imaginable vision into small, concrete, manageable steps. As though the disciples had already let him know that his concept hadn't quite caught them; that they couldn't see his vision, because the objections in their heads obscured their sight.

Three of the Gospels record that immediately after the Palm Sunday parade, Jesus walked into the Temple and started raising his voice angrily, disturbingly; turning over the tables of money-changers who were profiting from sacrifices that people had come to make as gifts to God. One of those writers, Matthew, says that part of the commotion in the Temple courtyard while all this was going on was shouting. *Children* shouting, to be specific. Children who had

followed Jesus in from the parade, and who had not yet given up calling out what they'd heard out in the street. 'Hosanna to the King, the Son of David!' With their voices and their palm branches and their energetic little bodies, they were still cheering, long after all the adults had gone quiet, long after cheers for Jesus seemed appropriate, or useful.

It's hard to stop children from playing, exercising their imaginations. Children are always better than adults are at imagining things we don't know much about. Objections about being more realistic seem kind of irrelevant to children's work. 'Do you hear what those children are saying?' they asked Jesus, accusingly. 'Yes, I do,' he answered.

There's a fair amount of theological debate about whether Jesus knew everything that would happen to him in the week beyond Palm Sunday, the week we now call Holy Week. Surely the disciples did not know. They had no idea what lay ahead. Almost certainly, they could never have imagined that the adoring crowd Jesus could attract just by riding on a *donkey* could shift so quickly; that the same crowd might re-assemble in less than a week to shout again—not *Hosanna!*, but *Crucify him!* If the disciples had known, they would have had even another objection to add to the list. *This is dangerous. Don't get out there ahead of your skis. Make sure you've consolidated your power base first.*

But Jesus didn't seem interested in predicting the chances of success, or failure. He knew—even better than we do—that life can turn on a dime. That at any moment, things can go all wrong, as easily as they can go all right. What Jesus seemed to trust, just like children do, is that somehow, no matter what happened, the universe would be strong enough to hold together, to hold him. That holding-together force: that's the God he believed in with his whole heart, with every at-risk fiber of his body.

You and I know how Holy Week turned out for Jesus; what shifted, shockingly, between Sunday and Friday. The message of this week could be 'Life will humiliate you. The same people who threw a parade in your honor on Sunday can want to crucify you on Friday. At any moment, your life can reverse direction, take you down, no matter how carefully you have planned.'

And that is true. The truth is, everything we begin, every commitment, every journey, every week actually, requires us to turn toward possibilities we can't see fully.

- On your wedding day, when you make a commitment for life. Will he love me the way he's supposed to, the way I need him to, years from now?
- When you do your work. Will they see how hard I have tried?
- When your child goes through hard times. Will she listen? Will she do what I know is best for her?
- When a diagnosis is spoken. Will the treatment be effective? Will I be OK?

You can analyze the risks, do your research, calculate the possibilities that have the best likelihood of success. You can use all your intellectual capacity to plan the safest course of action. And it might still all go wrong. People will disappoint you. The system may not work the way it's supposed to. The odds may be against you. We know this. We make contingency plans for this. We know how to predict a Sunday-through-Friday world.

But we don't live in a world that stopped on Good Friday. We live in a world in which Jesus was alive again on Easter Sunday. The meaning of everything that happens to us lives in a story that says 'the arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward life.'

I want to suggest to you this morning, at the beginning of Holy Week, that what you need to live well through this time, to go home again in the metaphor of the exile story, may not be more research, or a better mind for predicting potential outcomes. What you need is a different story. It's not scientists, or strategists, or even theologians, who will help us figure out the meaning of this time; it's novelists, and poets, and storytellers. People who will help us imagine that the world is something more than what we can see right now. That's what Holy Week is about: re-storying our lives. It's about carrying a new story in our bones, even when it's not in our sight.

I'm thinking about those Israelites at the end of their time in exile, as they began to imagine the possibility of leaving and going home. They knew the stories from history. Their ancestors had left a bad situation once before. Egypt, slavery. They remembered the stories: the blessing of safety through a plague that passed over their homes; the exhilaration of walking through the Red Sea. And then—forty years in the wilderness. Hunger, not knowing when the next water would appear, asking whether manna would continue to drop from the sky every day.

Who could say they wouldn't face all those dangers again on the way home?
What if living in exile was better than what they'd find if they left it?
What if you can't go home again? What if it didn't look the way they remembered it?
What if there were no more miracles?

To leave where you are, even exile, is risky. It means trading what you know for a dream you can't be sure of. Even if you know where you're going, there's always that instant when you're in between. The distance between what you know and what you've imagined. Going to a new home always leaves you homeless for a moment.

We may not be able to think our way out of the mess the world is in right now. Maybe we can only imagine something different. Or maybe what's required of us is something even different than that. Maybe it's trusting that there is an imagination that's bigger than ours.

'Go' is a command to leave behind the narrative that's in your head, your predictions about all the things that might go wrong. It's allowing for the possibility that there's something else at work here. It's a discipline: to de-center your objections, to trust that there is something at loose in the world that is not predictable, something that refuses to be enclosed by our good, logical minds. Something that says, 'There is life ahead, much more life.'

So listen. Maybe there's a voice saying to you, to us, what Isaiah said to the people in exile, a long time ago:

*Yes, you will go out with celebration,
and you will be brought back in peace.*

*Even the mountains and the hills will burst into song before you;
all the trees of the field will clap their hands.*

Really? Is that possible?

Maybe not today. No doubt there are hard times still ahead of us. But just imagine.

ⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/28/sunday-review/pandemic-habits-routine-brain.html>