

Message: “What Are You Doing?”

Daniel drove north on the PCH (Pacific Coast Highway) after work one day. He'd decided to surf a new beach. He was excited to try out a different spot.

It was a miserably gray day with intermittent rain showers, but the waves looked fun. As Daniel pulled into the parking lot, his car was the only vehicle. The beach was empty. Daniel grabbed his board and headed down a flight of stairs. Feeling the sand between his toes, he watched the water for a moment, taking in the waves. He was anxious to get out there.

Then Daniel felt it, an inner conviction, “*Don't paddle out.*”

He'd never felt anything like it before, this urge. It cut through his thoughts as if it originated from somewhere else. It was strong. Daniel wasn't sure where it came from or what to make of it. But the waves looked so promising, and he felt invincible. So, he brushed aside the feeling and pulled on his wetsuit.

As Daniel entered the water, he felt it again. “*Don't paddle out.*”

This time, almost pleading with him. Daniel ignored it and dove into the surf, swimming until he was out past the break. He sat up on his board, bobbing in the water, and waited to catch a wave.

To Daniel's dismay, as soon as he'd paddled out, the waves turned to garbage. There was a strong current that kept him paddling the whole time to stay in place. He was only in the water for 30 minutes when, out of frustration, he decided to leave.

Daniel made his way to shore. But because of the current, he was a few hundred yards away from the parking lot. He had to walk along the edge of the cliff-lined shore. The tide was coming in, leaving a small strip next to the cliff face to walk on. The edges of the waves lapped at his feet as he made his way along the rocks.

That's when it happened, the water receded. And kept receding...

With terror, Daniel realized the water was about to surge, and he was in front of a deep cave, with nowhere to go.

Daniel braced for the wave's impact. “God, help me!” he cried out. Then he was swept under the water. Everything went black.

When Daniel came to, he was pinned to the back of the cave. The water was up to his neck. His surfboard was behind him, protecting his head from the rocky wall. But he wasn't out of danger. Daniel had to get out of the cave before another wave came; before the tide rose even higher. He felt the water start to pull out to sea.

Daniel swam with everything he had, clearing the cave's mouth. He didn't stop until he reached a safe stretch of beach past the cliff face. There he flopped on the sand, panting, heart pounding.

While lying there, Daniel realized God had tried to warn him. Even though Daniel ignored the warning, God protected him. God showed mercy. He only had a few small bumps and bruises. He hadn't inhaled any water. He was shaken up but was pretty much unharmed. It was a hard-learned lesson, and one he'll never forget.

It's been 22 years since that day. Daniel still surfs, but now he listens carefully for God's warnings before he heads out. And if Daniel gets one, he pays attention.¹

What a powerful story! Even though he didn't understand when God nudged him, Daniel caught on eventually. He knew he'd done wrong by not paying attention to God's urges and pleas to listen. Thankfully, he turned to God in the moment of his trial. And God responded. Daniel knows he can trust God and find refuge with the Lord. This lesson has stayed with him all his life. These experiences do stay with us.

Daniel's story reminds me of David's song in Psalm 31 and the people who followed Jesus into Jerusalem as part of a parade. They were confused, afraid, feeling shame and seeking security. Their question was, "Where can we turn for comfort?"

You don't have to read much of Psalm 31 to realize it's a lament. David is singing about his personal fears and troubles, as well as concerns about his place in the community. He's depressed, weak and feeling like everyone is out to get him. The only people who pay attention to him are the trolls and his enemies. His friends are avoiding him. You know the expression, "out of sight, out of mind." He's definitely feeling anguish.

¹Material from <https://guideposts.org/angels-and-miracles/miracles/gods-grace/a-surfers-divine-warning/>

Yet, David knows where to go. Better, he knows whom to go to. He sings with confidence, *“I trust you, Lord! I affirm, ‘You are my God’”* (Psalm 31:14). God is David’s refuge, the rock on which he can stand, no matter what he has done wrong, what others may do to him or what circumstance he finds himself in.

There is no shame with God. There is no fear with God. There is forgiveness, grace and mercy with God. God is with us, through thick and thin. This is the sign Jesus boldly proclaimed when he rode into Jerusalem on the back of a colt on that first Palm Sunday.

This is a great reversal. Jesus has been a mysterious figure in Mark’s narrative. He’s avoided sharing who he is, sworn his disciples to secrecy and kept to himself. Now, suddenly, he makes a big, dramatic splash with a parade into Jerusalem during the busiest time of the year, the week of the Jewish Passover.

Why? Jesus didn’t do it for himself. He did it for us. Jesus was giving a sign to all people: the One we know as a quiet teacher, shepherd and healer is the king of kings, truly. We can give him our respect, reverence and trust. Even better, we are invited to join the parade.

When we join the parade, we are celebrating Jesus because he is the only One whom we can truly trust. And, when we trust him, our fear, shame and doubt melt away. No matter whether we are sad, depressed, struggling, feeling shamed, battling with addiction, there is a way forward. There is hope.

Trust Jesus. When you are in a relationship with him, you will find refuge from the storms and chaos of life. You will find courage to face the trials and temptations each week brings. And, even when you fail, fall off the wagon, or ignore the warnings, you can turn back, and receive God’s mercy. Once you are aligned with God, you can be confident your faith will be met with assurance and hope.

Rick shares a story about assurance. A friend emailed him asking, “Does your church march around outside on Palm Sunday?” For a moment, Rick considered lying and telling him, “No, we don’t. Not at our church.” He was afraid his friend wouldn’t come if he told them his church had a Palm Sunday parade.

I understand his hesitation. It sounds embarrassing, doesn't it? Rick's church is in New York City and the congregation marches outside the building, carrying palms, worshipping on a busy New York street on Palm Sunday. To some, it's not a pretty picture. There's always a big group on Palm Sunday and getting everybody organized to march outside and go down the block is unwieldy.

We'd probably think the same thing Rick did, "What if someone was looking? What if someone I knew saw me?"

To make matters more confusing, the congregation tries to sing while they process. The front part of the procession usually gets ahead of the back part, so they don't even end up singing together. Sometimes they're just a disjoint group of people staring at programs and hymnals, stuck at a traffic light.

And yet, Rick is always struck by the wonder of it. Palm Sunday is a chance to take our faith outside and put it on parade. What an occasion of witness.

Maybe someone will look up from their coffee, glance out the window and think, "Those people must really believe in what they're doing, or they wouldn't risk looking so foolish." Paul made this point in his letter to the Corinthians. What looks foolish to the world can be God's wisdom at work, "*because the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom.*"

Maybe foolishness itself is important to experience on Palm Sunday. Think of how self-conscious the disciples must have felt when they were walking along behind Jesus on the colt with the people shouting, "*Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is one who comes in the name of the Lord.*"

Didn't they worry about being noticed? Weren't the apostles wary of what this hosanna-singing crowd really thought? After all, in less than a week, some of these same people waving their palm branches would be urging the authorities to crucify Jesus.

One phrase which comes to mind for this Palm Sunday parade is “humiliation.” The events that followed led to a tremendous, monstrous humiliation. When we celebrate Holy Week, we walk through what Jesus’ followers felt - bewilderment, despair, fear and faltering faith.

Don’t we feel all those things when we contemplate Jesus’ suffering?

Palm Sunday is a mixed celebration, a parade ending in a minor key. Sorrow hovers close by. We start out singing songs of praise and then we end contemplating the crucifixion.

What are we to say when our friends, family and neighbors ask us about what we do on Palm Sunday? Perhaps we can follow Rick’s example.

“Yes, we walk outside on Palm Sunday,” Rick wrote back to his friend. “It’s a little embarrassing and I’m sure we look foolish, but it’s a good foolishness. It’s a way to welcome what is coming, getting ready for Easter, which has always looked like foolishness to the world. Come to church with us. I’ll give you a palm frond of your own to carry.”²

Maybe we can share the same hope Rick has, “I hope they come this year.”

Let us pray ...

² <https://guideposts.org/prayer/holiday-prayers/palm-sunday-faith-on-parade/>

Psalm 31:9-16 (CEB)

Have mercy on me, Lord, because I'm depressed.

My vision fails because of my grief,
as do my spirit and my body.

My life is consumed with sadness;
my years are consumed with groaning.

Strength fails me because of my suffering;
my bones dry up.

I'm a joke to all my enemies,
still worse to my neighbors.

I scare my friends,
and whoever sees me in the street runs away!

I am forgotten, like I'm dead,
completely out of mind;

I am like a piece of pottery, destroyed.

Yes, I've heard all the gossiping,
terror all around;

so many gang up together against me,
they plan to take my life!

But me? I trust you, Lord!

I affirm, "You are my God."

My future is in your hands.

Don't hand me over to my enemies,
to all who are out to get me!

Shine your face on your servant;
save me by your faithful love!

Mark 11:1-11 (CEB)

When Jesus and his followers approached Jerusalem, they came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives. Jesus gave two disciples a task, saying to them, “Go into the village over there. As soon as you enter it, you will find tied up there a colt that no one has ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ say, ‘Its master needs it, and he will send it back right away.’”

They went and found a colt tied to a gate outside on the street, and they untied it. Some people standing around said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” They told them just what Jesus said, and they left them alone. They brought the colt to Jesus and threw their clothes upon it, and he sat on it. Many people spread out their clothes on the road while others spread branches cut from the fields. Those in front of him and those following were shouting, “*Hosanna! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord!* Blessings on the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest!” Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. After he looked around at everything, because it was already late in the evening, he returned to Bethany with the Twelve.