

Pulling over

We are called to act with compassion, even when it means a detour in our own plans

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Late afternoon shadows were lengthening, and it was hard to see my way through the streets of downtown Des Moines. When a figure loomed unexpectedly ahead, I had to hit the brakes. A disheveled man was running down the middle of the street with his arms spread wide.

I was on my way to dinner and the theater, and I had promised not to be late. I did not want to be bothered or delayed by anyone else's needs. But the man in the street was clearly in distress. I pulled to the curb and flipped on my hazard lights.

People on the sidewalk gawked and laughed. Others tried not to notice. I dialed 911 from my mobile phone and explained the situation as I ran. I pulled the man out of the street just as a car narrowly missed both of us. My actions were not safe and perhaps not wise. But I was compelled.

I reflect on that moment now, as Christianity reenacts a sacred journey through the streets of Jerusalem. Holy Week opens with Palm Sunday and accolades for a presumed liberator. The people are so frenzied when Jesus arrives that they cut palm branches to use in a makeshift parade and take off their coats to carpet the avenue. They want Jesus to be their king and expect him to free them from an oppressive government.

This prophet—who has a following of the homeless, the hungry, the dispossessed, lepers, thieves, prostitutes and other outcasts—has indeed started a revolution, but not the expected coup d'état. Jesus' rebellion compels personal action; it demands compassion and inclusion. Disillusioned mobs take to the streets and transform their heralds to calls for an execution. Jesus will again be paraded, but this time on his way to a cross. His arms will be spread wide, too.

The man on the downtown street was a lot bigger than I am, so my options were limited. I wanted to stay with him until help arrived, but he ran off. All I could do was stop traffic so he could cross one street in safety. He disappeared, and I felt disillusioned. My promise to be on time for dinner was broken, I had put myself at risk, and I didn't have anything to show for it.

Holy Week is a time to examine our failed intentions. How do heralding hosannas turn to cries for crucifixion? With so many resources, how do people end up in the streets? The challenges are bigger than any one of us, and our engagement could be hazardous and leave us disillusioned. But standing on the sidelines gawking or trying not to notice the fractures of our society gets us nowhere. We must be bothered and compelled!

A rebellion of compassion and inclusion is a difficult road. The shadows of Holy Week are long, and sometimes we have trouble seeing our way. But we must watch for those in the streets.

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