

Things turn around: A Palm Sunday crisis

by [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [April 21, 2009](#) issue

Eight years ago, I was preparing for Holy Week and for Palm Sunday—my favorite Sunday—when our family was overtaken by an unexpected crisis. I have always looked forward to Palm Sunday because of my childhood memories of waving the palms in processions at any number of churches, of adults who could miraculously fold those long palms into a small cross that I kept all year long, and of the pageantry and the choruses of “All Glory, Laud and Honor,” as well as of the giggles that erupt among the children whenever the minister says the word *ass*. I still think that’s funny.

Palm Sunday is for me as a minister the gateway to the busiest week of my year. There would be an attendance surge at church, multiple worship bulletins to put together, so many services to plan—and Easter, the biggest of all, around the corner. So I love Palm Sunday the way an accountant loves April 15. It signals the most intense week in my working life, the week I was made for, the week I saved up for, the week that reminds me why it is that I do what I do, even if it ends in exhaustion.

Shortly before Palm Sunday that year, our eight-year-old son was under the weather. My husband, Lou, had volunteered to cover the doctor’s appointment and the inevitable trip to the drugstore for whatever prescription would clear up Calvin’s little infection. “You go to the gym,” he said. “You need to relieve some stress.” And I took my hall pass freely.

I was drinking a cup of coffee in the gym’s café, feeling the post-workout glow of relaxed self-righteousness, when I picked up a call from Lou reporting on Calvin’s visit to the doctor. “We’re being admitted to the hospital,” he told me. “They say that Calvin has diabetes.”

My first reaction, I must confess, was one of judgment. “I should never have let Lou take Cal to this appointment,” I thought to myself—as mothers, who believe they can do everything just a little bit better than their husbands, often do. “Lou has gone

and messed everything up. And now they are admitting our son to the hospital for no reason.” I was calm as we made plans to meet there in a few minutes.

I was calm because I knew that there was absolutely no possibility that this diagnosis could be accurate. Calvin was healthy in every way. Juvenile diabetes was something that ran in families, and it didn’t run in ours. I drove calmly to the hospital, ready to clear this up for everyone. Instead they were waiting to clear things up for me.

A chronic condition is impossible to understand to those of us who don’t have one. As a parent, I needed to understand as much as I possibly could. At the hospital we were bombarded with information about this strange disease.

Unlike the more common type 2 diabetes, which is growing to epic proportions in this country, the much rarer juvenile diabetes, or type 1, cannot be reversed by diet or lifestyle. With type 1 diabetes, the body’s own immune system attacks the pancreas for no apparent reason. The pancreas then shuts down—slowly over a few months—and there is absolutely nothing that can be done about it. Suddenly, out of nowhere, our son was dependent on insulin, and would be for the rest of his life.

It is ironic that all this happened just days before Holy Week—ironic, because Holy Week begins with the cheerful procession of people waving their palms before Jesus, shouting Hosanna. His followers are ecstatic. They are having a party in the street. But in a matter of days, the disciples will be eating their last meal with Jesus. He’ll be betrayed. They’ll be afraid. The cheering and partying will seem like a distant memory from a time when they thought life was easy.

Those days spent in the hospital, I later realized, were more about us as parents than about our son. His health stabilized quickly once he received the insulin his body had stopped making. It’s a lot better to have diabetes in the 21st century than it was in the early 20th.

But we, his parents, needed a lot more treatment. The doctors would not release Calvin from the hospital and into our care until they were convinced that we could manage his treatment, that we had adjusted to this change. We learned about what he should eat to avoid high blood sugar levels. We learned that he would have to monitor his carbohydrates so the right dosage of insulin could be supplied. This

would keep his blood sugar at the right level and allow him to live a “perfectly normal life.”

Just when we got that straight, we learned that when Calvin’s blood sugar was too low he should eat the very things that otherwise he shouldn’t eat. Treating this disease is frustratingly counterintuitive. “I thought diabetics couldn’t eat sweets,” I said. “Actually,” the doctor said, “in a case of low blood sugar, when he’s had too much insulin, he has to have sweets in order to avoid a diabetic coma.” This was not sounding to me like a “perfectly normal life.”

What is a perfectly normal life? Have you noticed that the only time that phrase is invoked is at times when life is neither perfect nor normal? But is life ever perfect or normal? We had been at the hospital for days, taking turns there and with our five-year-old daughter at home. We had friends but no family nearby. My mother had died a year before, and I don’t think I ever grieved for her as much as I did in those days at the hospital.

Calvin was a trooper, positive in his attitude and interested in the treatments—but mostly interested in the hospital’s Nintendo, since video games were something he did not have at home. But as flexible as he was about being in the hospital, my heart became consumed with one desire: Calvin must come home. I think I believed that if we left the hospital we could leave all this unwelcome news there as well. “I just want to get him home and deal with all this there,” I said to the doctor. “Everything will be fine if we can just get out of here.”

“He can’t be released until you are able to manage this,” was the doctor’s response.

“Well, what else do we need to do?” I asked.

“You and your husband need to learn how to give your son his shots,” he said. “I’m going to have you practice with saline solution so that you can get the hang of it.” Calvin grimaced, brave but probably doubtful as to our abilities.

My husband gave his first shot with confidence, and Calvin took it with similar confidence. Between the two of them I saw a strength that I knew I did not have. I held the syringe in a hand that was not steady, but shaking. I winced away from myself—a person with a lifetime fear of needles, twitching uncomfortably in my own

skin, sorrowfully squeamish, utterly convinced that I could not do this one simple thing. But this was our only way to get Calvin home.

Finally I jabbed the needle into him—the most counter intuitive action a needle-phobic mother could perform for a child she loves. When it made contact, he screamed in pain. I had hit a muscle. And I did the worst thing you could do; I jerked the needle out again, causing more pain. “You have to put it in,” the doctor said. So I jabbed again, this time doing an even worse job. I watched my sweet boy lunge away from me, grabbing his arm protectively, glaring at his mother, who had in one clumsy moment hurt him, failed him and frightened him. We were not going home from the hospital yet.

By now it was the Saturday before Holy Week. Our thoughts turned from getting Calvin home to the more reachable goal of getting him to church the next day for Palm Sunday. The doctor agreed that Calvin could leave the hospital for a few hours to attend the service. Lou stayed at the hospital with Calvin, and I spent that Saturday night at home, sleepless and unprepared for the most important week in my year, which suddenly seemed a lot less important.

Because I love Palm Sunday, I had planned a lot for that day. There was to be the usual grand procession with the palms, the special music, the triumphant entry into Jerusalem. But because I had assumed that this would be a celebratory day, I had decided that it would also be the day that new members would join the church. Early that Sunday morning, I sat at the desk in the church’s front office, not feeling celebratory at all. I wondered if it would be easier to simply lead the congregation through the service and then tell them the news, or whether I should tell them first. It seemed like a different person had planned this festive Palm Sunday worship service.

One of the new members who was to join the church that day, a young man in the medical field, had arrived bright and early. “How are you this morning?” he asked, not realizing that he was the first person I had seen at church that morning and that he was about to really find out how I was. “You know what, I’m not doing too great. My son is in the hospital, diagnosed with diabetes, out of nowhere, and he may or may not get to come to church today. No, diabetes doesn’t run in my family, unless you count my great uncle, who I am just now remembering. He lost his leg to it in his thirties and his life to it in his forties, leaving behind a widow and a little daughter.

They say he never took care of himself, but how do you make someone take care of himself? So how am I doing? To be honest, I'm a little shaky."

I realized that I had said more than I had wanted to say, and more than he, a new member, had asked. I think I remember saying, "Sorry," as we careful people do when we are accidentally honest with one another.

"Juvenile diabetes or type 2?" he asked, evidently knowing a distinction that most people do not. "Type 1?" I nodded.

"Well, I have type 1 diabetes too," he said. "In fact, it's what drove me to go into medicine. I'm passionate about helping people to live healthy lives with this condition."

I looked at this young man who seemed to have it all together—he was the picture of health, a person who had talked about climbing mountains and kayaking and who traveled the world. Suddenly my image of this disease had a new face, and I liked it a lot better than my late great uncle's.

"I think that's why I am joining the church today," he said, and we both stopped to take that in. "I'm going to be a friend to your son, and help you deal with this."

And that is exactly what happened. That young man's friendship changed our lives in the years that followed, and none of that would have happened were we not joined together in the body of Christ, not just when our news is good but also when it's bad.

On Palm Sunday, things change so quickly. The followers of Jesus move from triumph to tragedy in a matter of days. That's how quickly life moves too. But as surely as the arc goes down as we begin the solemn services of Holy Week, we know that the arc will go up again at Easter Sunday.

Some resurrections are enormous and get recorded in scripture to be read about year after year. Other resurrections are smaller. They happen in the midst of ordinary lives. And we witness one another's resurrections in church all the time. For me that Palm Sunday morning, what was resurrected was hope. And when my son ran into church that morning, finally out of the hospital and being his energetic self, I

knew that as quickly as things change, they can change in all directions, as much as they do in Holy Week.

It turns out that my son was released from the hospital later on that Palm Sunday. But he was not released because we his parents had finally mastered it all. In fact, I never learned how to give that shot. I had failed and I would never succeed. But as a result of my failure, something remarkable happened. An eight-year-old boy, whose life must have seemed to him terribly out of control, decided to take control. After what I did to him, he said, "Nobody else is ever going to give me a shot. I'm doing it myself." And he did it—and because of what he was able to do, he was released that day.

I thought back to my devastation at failing to give the shot. I remember thinking that I had hit an all-time low, not just unable to help, but contributing to the hurt. But the lesson of Holy Week is that pain and sorrow do not have the last word. My failure had opened up the way for my son to succeed.

While I would have given anything to have gotten it right, in the midst of my getting it wrong, God was working on the bigger picture, and my Holy Week story now has yet another hero, an eight-year-old boy (now a 16-year-old young man) whose courage I admire every Palm Sunday when I think about how quickly things can change. And I also think of that new member. He probably thought that he was joining the church that day because he needed it. But sometimes the reason you join the church is because somebody there needs you.