

Playing Jesus

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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A few days ago, I led a parade around a Chicago block—on horseback. It was weird.

My church replaced last Sunday's [passion reading](#) with a sung setting of [John's account](#). The music director asked me to sing the part of Jesus, and like many dutiful church members before, I got more than I bargained for: extra rehearsals, some light staging to go with the singing, an expectation that I lead the Palm Sunday parade.

Then on Sunday morning, while I stood in a borrowed alb in the freezing rain, my pastor asked me to climb on a horse.

Apparently a good donkey is hard to find. At my childhood church, our solution was a two-person costume, and I played the back half—not even as the first-choice ass's ass but as his understudy. A pastor's kid, I played many parts only slightly less lowly. I was the trusting young Isaac, the servant who loses an ear, the thief on the right, either [Mahlon or Chilion](#), a terrified shepherd boy. But never Jesus—not until this week. I hadn't been on a horse in more than 20 years. The poor thing was pretty nervous about all the people, as was the farmer handling it. I rode with a persuasive expression of dread on my face.

In the service, I processed behind the pastor and seminarian as they strewed palms in my path. We sang John's passion, and I resisted the urge to do any on-the-fly editing—I called God "Father" and talked about "my kingship"; I [let Pilate off the hook and blamed the Jews](#) instead. But I also found myself able to meditate on Jesus' fear and shame more than ever before. When the other singers hurled their rage in my direction—"Away with him! Crucify him!"—I felt lower than a donkey.

During the peace, I was struck by how warmly the church's children greeted me. Perhaps they took me for a pastor—I wore just an alb, no beard or telltale blue sash—but I sensed they were greeting me as Jesus. Or maybe it was both: as a

layperson, I don't know what it's like to routinely vest, proclaim the gospel and serve people knowing that at some level they see you as a surrogate for Jesus. Can you discourage this? Should you? Does it ever start to feel normal? Or does every Holy Week bring a reminder of the distance between ritual remembrance and the thing itself, between a rented animal that could possibly hurt someone and the path Jesus knew would kill him?

I do know that a couple hours of playing Jesus was enough for me. Trying to walk with Jesus through Holy Week is always meaningful, but standing in for him in a dramatic worship service was strangely intense. After church, I pretended to be in a hurry and slipped out the door.