

False Options on Palm Sunday
What Can Stand in the Way Series
Acts 9:1-19
Week 5: April 9, 2017

Welcome/intro/vision

This is our last week of our What Can Stand in the Way series
and in this series we've been looking at the story of the very first Jesus-followers as they started to spread out all around the ancient Mediterranean spreading the news of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus

And calling all kinds of people to follow Jesus in making this world new again

And in spite of all the obstacles that they faced both internally and externally

In spite of the fact that they weren't especially well organized, in spite of the fact that they didn't have any money and no big plan

And even without cell phones or Google calendars or spreadsheets or workflow optimization software, and somehow even without you or me around to tell them what they should do

What we've seen is that nothing can stand in the way of this work going forward—it just rolls on and on and on

And the invitation to all of us is to embrace the life-giving mission of Christ, to be a part of his work to bring renewal and grace, truth and justice, light and life to every place he might send us

Now, today is a special day in the life of the church around the world

today we enter into the final week of Jesus's life leading up to his crucifixion on Friday and then the resurrection we'll celebrate next week on Easter Sunday

So we're going to step back in the flow of the story today from where we've been looking at the early church to the last days of Jesus

And on this day, Jesus arrives in the city of Jerusalem to a throng of people who are all gathered for the biggest celebration of the Jewish calendar, the Passover celebration race out to meet Jesus with a hero's welcome

And loaded up in that welcome, with all the excitement and all energy of the crowd

there are a number of options for Jesus that could have spared him the pain and agony of the cross but would have stood in the way of the real mission going forward

And today we're going to watch as Jesus navigates these false options that are all much more appealing than the road he's actually supposed to walk

And we're going to celebrate that he didn't fall for any of them

And then we're going to wrestle with the fact that in our own lives, we've got false options, too, that often look and sound and actually are much more appealing, much more alluring, much more comfortable

And we're going to wrestle with the call on our lives to take up our crosses and follow Jesus into the real mission that God has for each of us individually and together

See, what we find is that for every mission that God has given us, there are shadow missions and false options that might be in a similar ballpark but are a watered down version of what God put you on this earth to do

So let's watch as Jesus navigates his own enticing and false options on Palm Sunday and let's let what he does both propel us into greater admiration and deeper worship as well as help us to navigate our own false options and shadow missions

John 12: Bible/no Bible/screen

¹² The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. ¹³ They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Blessed is the king of Israel!"

....[SKIP TO]

¹⁹ So the Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!"

When I was a kid I loved this series of books called "Choose Your Own Adventure"—anyone else used to read these things?

The way it worked was you'd be reading a story like this one: **Trouble on Planet Earth**

And you'd read a couple of pages and then you'd come to a point in the story where a character would have to make a decision about what to do and you would be given a couple of different options to choose from and then a page number to turn to

So Trouble on Planet earth might read something like: You wake up in the middle of the night as an alien space ship lands in your backyard.

If you call 911 turn to page 21, if you go outside and investigate, turn to page 48 and if you stop, drop, and roll, go to the last page in the book

And then you'd turn to that page, and if you were dumb enough to stop, drop, and roll, you'd be abducted and carried off to be tormented slowly for eons you idiot

And I spent much time keeping my finger in a page where there was a big decision to make and reading ahead to see how that decision played out

And if I didn't like how it played out, I'd go back to that big decision and run down a different trail of what would happen if I called 911 instead or investigated instead

I want to suggest to you that as Jesus is entering into Jerusalem with all this enthusiasm from the crowd, Jesus is having a Choose Your Own Adventure Moment

And at the bottom of this page, there are four basic options for Jesus to choose from, all of them have some example from the Bible of other people who have done those things that were perfectly fine and acceptable and good for them

Jesus's four options were these: **Revolution, Reformation, Retreat, Cross.**

But three of them are false options and shadow missions that would have stood in the way of God's mission going forward and would have derailed this thing before it even got started

Only one of them is the path that Jesus is called to walk

Revolution, Reformation, Retreat, or Cross

let's look at these options here on what we call Palm Sunday, let's keep our finger here at this spot in the story and flip ahead and see what happens if he chooses one of those false options

The first and most obvious option is **Revolution**, that is a political or military overthrow of the government--this is most likely what this crowd wanted and what they were hoping for as Jesus entered into Jerusalem

The Jews had been occupied by the Greeks and then the Romans for hundreds of years they hated them

and there were all kinds of revolutions and revolutionary movements that were brewing in around the time of Jesus that we have record of

This crowd is looking to crown a new king and Jesus certainly looks like the answer to those prayers and hopes! This LOOKS like a coronation ceremony!

And if you're Jesus, given the options this certainly could have some sort of appeal. You can either go the way of a miserable, painful, torturous death

OR you can ride the energy and enthusiasm of the crowd to a popular and populist uprising and be crowned king to the roar of a crowd

If you're a people-pleaser, if you love approval, if you like control and power or if you just like prefer comfort and pleasure to pain and misery

This Revolutionary option seems pretty much like a no-brainer!

But let's keep our fingers there and see how choosing that adventure might play out.

The Romans had one of the most dominant empires in all of history

They had hundreds and hundreds of would-be revolutions that they crushed with relative ease over the years--the reality is that most likely any attempt by Jesus for some sort of coup would not last long

But let's just say that it did. And let's say that in the midst of the vast Roman Empire, Jesus managed to secure a little island of his own rule for the people of Israel for let's say 40 years or so that he defended until he died of natural causes

And let's say that for those 40 years or so, he had all the servants he wanted, he had all the power to make all the decisions he wanted to make, and all the chocolate cake and Turkish delight he could enjoy

Let's say that Jesus essentially lives the American dream and the American mission where he could live for his own comfort while reigning in his little kingdom for a few decades

Do you think you'd know his name? Do you think we'd be here today talking about him and singing his praises?

Do you think there'd be millions upon millions of people gathered this morning all over the world in almost every tribe and nation and language talking about him, studying his life, and declaring that this is the man who has unlocked all the secrets of being fully human and fully alive and fully connected to the God of the universe?

The Revolutionary choice is a shadow mission. And it's seductive not only because it might result in personal comfort and and power

It's seductive because Jesus *was* a deliverer and being a revolutionary was one way that deliverance could look!

It was a shadow mission that was very tempting because it looked kind of similar to his real mission

And the results of success would have in the short-term and immediate experience been much more tangible and concrete

it would have felt better on Good Friday to be crowned the king of the Jews with a crown of gold rather than a crown of thorns—that was the essence of this false, shadow mission

And that's how shadow missions almost always look, isn't it?

Shadow missions are almost always have some resonance with our actual mission but they promising faster/more convenient/more tangible rewards in exchange for stepping off of the path that God has called us to walk.

So one of the gifts that God has given to me is that I can keep *most* people's attention for *most* of a 30-minute presentation

Not everyone's attention! Some of you would prefer that I shut up much quicker and sooner! But most people's attention for most of or some chunk of about 30 minutes

And on the bad days, when things aren't going right or there's discouragement and frustration or things just aren't going great, we all have days like that, right?

On those days I sometimes wonder what would happen if I took that gift and did some cool consulting or coaching gig

where in my imaginary world I would fly first class to exotic locations wearing nice expensive clothes and meet cool and important and powerful people while making a whole bunch of money.

Nothing wrong with that gig, some of you do that and it's great and fine.

But for me, that's a shadow mission that's from time to time enticing because it plays to some of the gifts God's given me with the short-term promises of more convenient and tangible rewards

especially when the real mission that God's called me into feels hard or difficult or inconvenient

Jesus is facing his own shadow mission here to embrace becoming a Revolutionary

it's just a little bit off from the actual mission God's given him to do and it's very tempting: maybe no cross! MAYBE LOTS of short-term, tangible, easier rewards

And as Jesus stares down that open door on Palm Sunday, we've got to ask the question: ***what's one of your shadow missions? What are some things that appeals to you because it resonates with some version of what God has given you to do but with promises of less cost and faster, easier, more tangible rewards in exchange for leaving the path God has called you to walk?***

Of course, being a Revolutionary wasn't the only option for Jesus as he enters into Jerusalem to the roar of the crowd, in our choose-your-own adventure Jesus could have been a **Reformer** instead.

Revolutionaries look to totally blow things up and start over, that's how some of you like to roll but others of us we prefer to work within the system to transform or change the system

With the crowds behind him, Jesus could have approached the religious leaders and muscled his way in and leveraged the power of the crowds

that's what politicians often do, right? All sorts of politicians, both parties, using the power of the masses to acquire power and make change

"look, y'all [and we know that Jesus spoke Southern, so he totally used the word 'y'all'] don't like me but I've got the people behind me--So let me in and I'll lead us."

There were all kinds of religious and political divisions in Jesus's day

And maybe Jesus brings together a divided nation and reforms the religious and political parties and work within the system to make it a better, more just, more free, more equitable nation

And he would work with Rome to call of the dogs a little bit, give the Jewish people a little more freedom, Jesus was pretty convincing, you know?

And unlike the Revolutionary approach, this approach could have spared him the wrath of Rome because he would have been working with Rome to make things better for his people

Jesus talked about the value of peace-making, he **was** a peacemaker, Reformation was one bloodless way he could have made peace among his people!

What's wrong with that? Nothing! There are people throughout the Scriptures who navigate complex political scenes in savvy and wise ways to secure peace for the nation of Israel all the time

Nothing wrong with that shadow mission except it wasn't the one that God had given him to do—it was a twisted version of the story that God was calling him to step into

Both Revolution or Reformation could be totally great missions and works and could even be one of your great missions and works to do, but they're shadow missions and false options for Jesus

A third option for Jesus in the face of the Palm Sunday crowds is very different from either of those other two: **Retreat**

Some of you want nothing to do with revolution or reformation—they both sound like a whole lot of work and a whole lot of dealings with people!

And some of you want nothing to do with people—especially crowds! Crowds are loud and obnoxious and exhausting and high-maintenance.

And so there's another option for Jesus on Palm Sunday in the face of the crowds: Retreat. Form a parallel community out in the wilderness, in the desert or in the mountains, a 1st century hippy commune

There was a large group of people who actually did this—the Qumran community decided Rome stank but the power structure in Jerusalem and Israel wasn't much better

So they got rid of their cell phones, got off the grid, and became the original preppers

They moved out into caves in the desert and retreated and lived in community and dedicated themselves to the Scriptures and to praying for God to come back and deliver Israel from both Rome and the religious authorities

Retreat has a deep religious tradition in the Scriptures—there are all kinds of people who are called to step out of the flow of society and the power structures or the church or the temples

But for Jesus, this would have been a shadow mission, a false option getting off the grid would have been much simpler, much easier than going to the cross.

And for many of us, retreat is an enticing false option and shadow mission.

Retreat is especially appealing for two very different personality types:

some of us just don't like people. You don't trust people, don't like people, don't want anything to do with people

And the hardest part of Christianity for you is the whole love your neighbor part. So you solve that problem by just not having any neighbors or at least not getting to know them, it makes it a whole lot easier

So the idea of Retreat is pretty appealing to some of us who have all kinds of dislike or distrust of people and if you know that's you, or everyone around you knows that's you

Then before you take that path, you probably need to do some significant prayer and talk to the people you do trust to make sure that you're not simply falling into what's easiest or most convenient given your temperament and personality

But Retreat is also appealing to another group of people: conflict-avoiders. This is the path of least resistance, isn't it? Revolution and Reform innately involve some form of conflict and tussling with people

And retreat avoids all of that.

When I first got married, I knew that I didn't love conflict, but it very quickly became apparent that I was a hard-core conflict avoider, especially in the relationships closest to me

And eventually we ended up in a good bit of counseling and it became clear that I had a choice to make:

I could either embrace the hard work of learning how to have healthy conflict with my wife—that was clearly the call on my life and the work God wanted me to do

Or we would have just a shell of a marriage, just going through the motions, roommates, parallel lives that maybe looked okay from the outside but didn't have any relational depth—that was the shadow mission and it sure looked pretty enticing at the time

And there was an important, simple practice that I did that Jesus taught me that we'll come back to at the end that helped me to see through the shadow mission, to see how thin and empty that was and that helped me to embrace my actual mission.

Retreat is always appealing to us when times get difficult, and sometimes that's just what we need to do.

But for Jesus here, and for me about 18 years ago and maybe for you today, that's a shadow mission, a false choice

that feels safer or better in the short-term, but it falls short of the life and mission and work that God's actually prepared for you to do.

So Jesus is faced with these 3 false choices in his choose your own adventure: Revolutionary, Reformer, Retreat, Cross-- and the fourth choice is the least appealing at the outset, but it's the path that God's calling him to walk

AND, don't miss this, it's better.

Ultimately the path of the cross is not just the sacrificial thing to do not just the right thing to do, it's actually the BETTER thing for him, it's actually the more beneficial, the more glorious, the more life-giving thing for Jesus and for everyone else

But how do you cling to that less appealing but better choice when the crowds are calling hosanna and there's this rush of options and power and safety all clamoring for you to choose them instead of the hard way of the cross?

Jesus is going to show us how to navigate those hard life choices in the next section. Let me summarize what happens for the sake of time but I encourage you to read this over on your own later

The crowds have just finished shouting his name, the adulation, the applause, the allure, the other options hanging in the air, calling to him and are maybe more enticing than ever as he's coming to Jerusalem knowing that he's supposed to be coming to die

Jesus then gets a request for some face time over lunch or coffee from some autograph seekers and he replies with this little discourse and buried in that discourse are a bunch of statements that re-roots him in the actual mission that he's supposed to be on
take a look at what he says about his mission and purpose all within about 8 or 9 verses

23 Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 24 Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. 25 Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life..."

27 "Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. 28 Father, glorify your name!"...

31 Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. 32 And I, when I am lifted up^{al} from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

How do you cut through the siren call and allure of a false life mission like Drano cutting through a clog?

You speak your real mission. You rehearse it. Out-loud. To anyone who will listen, even if they're confused and have no idea what the heck you're talking about—read this whole text, nobody he's talking to understands any of this!

And that's in part because it's not for them! It's for him!

In the face of a massive wave of energy and adulation that presented all kinds of temptations to Jesus to punt on his actual mission and to instead embrace a watered down version of what his Father had called him to do

Jesus recites what he's there to do, he remembers it, he clings to it, and it cuts through the fog.

This is kind of like when you're in the car and you kind of have to go to the bathroom and then you say it out loud and then you REALLY have to go to the bathroom

Our words have the power to shape us and our realities and sometimes to re-connect us with truth in wondrous ways!

When I was early in my marriage and staring down my own shadow-mission of a conflict-avoidant shell of a marriage, in my journal I would recite my mission all the time:

The Scriptures have called me to love my wife, to even be willing to lay down my life for her. To honor and obey God I had to learn to love my wife in this way, I couldn't let fear and conflict avoidance call me into a shadow mission of an empty marriage and being an empty husband--that wasn't who God was calling me to be!

So I did lots of praying and journaling but then I also said it out loud to a few key people around me: my wife for one thing, our counselor, a couple of friends.

And saying what was true and who God was and what God had called me to be out loud put me on the hook in a good way

it helped to cut through the voices in my head, exposing the false choices and shadow missions for what they were, and inviting me to embrace the more life-giving mission of God

And because Jesus did this, and because he was able to make the faithful choice to follow God his Father all the way through to the experience on the cross

instead of a little nation state of Israel that was his to rule for a few short years, he instead has taken away all of sin and all of death forever and reconciled us to God

and over the past 2,000 years he has, indeed, drawn all kinds of people from all over the world to himself

And so we worship him and proclaim here today along with the church throughout the centuries that Jesus is Lord over all peoples, all nations, all things forever and ever amen.

All throughout your life, daily in small ways and then especially at critical moments or cross-roads

you're going to be faced with shadow missions and false choices that sound easier, safer, more expedient and more immediately gratifying than the actual mission and work that God has given you to do.

Jesus overcame that himself and teaches us how we might overcome it, too.

And so here are a couple of Wildly Important Take-Homes for you this week:

1. *What's your response to Jesus in light of his faithfulness to the work God gave him to do?*

It all starts here and I'd suggest *worship and followership* are the two most appropriate responses:

to delight in what he has done for us in his work on the cross, thank him, receive his gift of mercy and grace and to follow him into your own calling of his mission to bring grace and truth to this weary world.

So many of you are here wrestling with that claim, not sure yet what you think about all of that, we're so glad you're here!

Your wildly important take-home for this week is this: I want to invite you to join me in a couple of weeks to a 5-week Sunday night discussion and seminar we're calling Exploring Christianity, details are in your bulletin

This is going to be a place where you can come and we'll talk through the whole big picture, discuss and ask any question you want and really wrestle with what it means to be a Christian

So come and join me, it starts in 2 weeks on Sunday nights, all the details are in the bulletin and I'm so glad that there are so many of you here to warrant a class like this—thank you for being here

2. *What are the shadow missions that have plagued you past, present, or future?*

All of us have false or shadow missions that have called to us throughout our lives—it's likely that if you put some thought into you it, you could name one or two pretty easily

You've either fallen for it before or it's a voice that you hear fairly regularly that you know you have to fight back

What are your shadow missions?

They almost always have some resonance with our actual mission but they promising faster/more convenient/more tangible rewards in exchange for stepping off of the path that God has called us to walk.

3. *What's one thing that you know about God, yourself, or what God would have you to do that you can recite when shadow missions call your name?*

If you're a Jesus-follower, you need to have at least one or two truths or Scriptures that help to ground you in the face of all sorts of other alluring options

If you don't have one that you can think of off the top of your head, try one that Jesus used in the passage we just read:

²⁵ Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

The shadow missions almost always implore us to be saving and loving this life in this world. Jesus was staring down that same temptation. He used this line to help him to not fall for it. It'll help you, too.

My friends, as we head into Easter week, the good news is that even a set of very tempting and life-saving shadow missions could not stand in the way of God's work going forward

When Jesus was tempted to toss aside his mission for the sake of something far easier and more comfortable, he persevered all the way to death, even death on a cross.

And the invitation to you and to me is to worship and followership, that we nothing might stand in the way of his work going forward in us and through us.