

I. Set Up:

A. Welcome. Intro. This is third week of The I AM series. More importantly, it's Palm Sunday, which kicks off Holy Week. Mike will be reflecting on Christ's march into Jerusalem and looking ahead to his interaction with Pilate. All of this is a set up for the question: how are you managing the power you have to serve others?

B. The key passage is John 12:12f, which reads:

1. 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,
2. "Hosanna!"
3. "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"
4. "Blessed is the king of Israel!"

C. Right now

II. Intro:

A. Tensions are up. That's my read. It's not a scientific poll. But I have my sources.

1. For starters, there was an article in *The Globe and Mail* that talked about COVID Burnout. It generated a fair bit of comment.
 - a) One guy claimed the last year was so stressful that his eye brows fell out.
 - b) Citigroup has responded to rising stress levels by declaring Friday's Zoom Free days.
 - c) Even Goldman Sachs responded, saying it was cutting back on 100 hour work weeks for its new associates. 95 would be the new norm.
2. I actually had noticed a new wave of frustration before *The Globe and Mail* piece came out. I based it on: conversations with friends, emails sent my way, and things going on at the church.

B. Just to be clear, when I say tensions are up, I am not talking about what is happening globally or nationally. There is that. As always, the news is full of examples of our fallen state: this week saw another shooting – this one in Colorado; we have a border crisis; there is ongoing political acrimony and gridlock, several governors are fighting for their political life, Myanmar, North Korea and Iraq remain deeply troubled. Many people seem determined to ascribe the worst intentions to anyone who doesn't agree with them; cancel culture is running amuck.

1. The news is so consistently depressing that I know a growing number of people who choose to no longer know what is going on. I am not referring to people who have never bothered to know what is going on, nor those who are so overwhelmed by work demands that they say they simply have not been able to keep up. I am talking about people who used to keep up who made the decision to unplug. I have one friend who – a while back - made me promise not to talk about any news items with him. It was a condition of talking.

C. But when I say tensions are up, I am not talking about the global or national or even statewide issues. I am reflecting what I am observing close to home. It feels as if we crossed some threshold and people have had enough. All of this has gone on long enough. “I’m sick of it and I’m not going to play nice anymore.”

D. Shortly after the lock down started a year ago, Tim Keller – a pastor in NYC - held a Zoom Webinar for pastors. It was one of the first Zoom events I attended. And he said:

1. When 9/11 hit, I got a call from a pastor in OK City, who said, “Pace yourself. You will have plenty of energy for a year, and then the wheels fall off.”

2. The pastor reaching out to Keller had been serving a church in Oklahoma City back in '95 when Timothy McVeigh bombed the Alfred Murrah Federal Building killing 168 people and injuring another 680.

3. This pastor said people initially pulled together and there was support and comradery for about a year, and then lots of people burned out.

E. Keller said, he dismissed the warning, thinking it would not happen to him. He thought he had the personal devotional practices in place that would sustain him. But he was wrong. He said the OK pastor’s warning was one he – and many others – should have heeded. And so, he held a webinar to say, “here is what we learned in the aftermath of 9/11.”

F. As you may remember, Nathan Clayton, who attends here with his family – his son is helping lead worship at the new Vernon Hills launch – I had Nathan preach on his experiences in NYC as a pastor. He had started serving at a church in NYC three weeks before 9/11 hit.

1. I went back to him after I heard Keller and he asked, “Is he right? Did you burn out after a year.” And Nathan said, “Yes. It happened. After the crisis lots of things happened and it was good. We had a year in which lots of people came to faith and churches were cooperating and good things were happening. And then, right around a year into this, a bunch of us burned out.”

G. So, I had my eye on the one-year anniversary. And when everyone started to get a bit more snarky, I wasn’t completely surprised.

H. To be clear, I am not exactly sure this is what is going on. But I do know:

1. there is a growing amount of anger in the system. Consequently, it doesn’t take as much for things to escalate.

2. And I also know that there are opportunities at moments like this for us to re-align our hearts and stay the course.

3. I want you to know, we can make it. You can make it. God has everything under control. This ends well. I can make no promises about what unfolds between now and the end, but I know who controls the future, and I know that in Christ our future is secure.

4. And I also know that two-thousand years ago things were tense, and Jesus chose to love and serve. He modeled a path for us to follow during tense times. I am thinking about Holy Week.

III. The passage that was read – John 12 – talks about that. It reports on what is a fairly well-known story.

A. The Jews held an annual religious festival to celebrate their deliverance from Egyptian captivity which had happened during Moses's day 1,300 years earlier.

1. We read about the initial event in the Book of Exodus - the Pharaoh, ten plaques, parting of the Red Sea. All of that.

B. The annual Passover celebration – that the Jews had been celebrating for most of the last 1,300 years - was their 4th of July party. And so, every year they flooded into Jerusalem for a week to repeat the activities that Moses had led them through in advance of the actual Passover.

1. They took a lamb - a perfect one year old male – symbolic of Jesus, the Passover lamb who takes away the sins of the world.

2. They took this “Jesus substitute” and – at 3:00 in the afternoon they slaughtered it, being careful not to break any of its bones. They then painted some of the lamb's blood above the mantle of their home so that when the Angel of Death came by, he would “pass over” their household. He would see that innocent blood had already been shed for the guilty people living there.

Otherwise, the first-born son of the family would die, which is what happened to the Egyptians, which was what finally persuaded Pharaoh to let the slaves go free.

3. For 1,300 years, the Jews had repeated this event – reminding themselves of how God rescued them.

4. The John passage that was read reports on Jesus entering Jerusalem for the annual Passover event. However, this time it would be different.

C. You need to understand that in some ways the Passover celebration was a great time in Jerusalem. The city's population surged from about 50,000 to probably 4 – 5 times that as all kinds of people came back. You got to see old friends and family. And you are celebrating this great day in history – deliverance at the hand of God.

D. But in other ways the Passover was a time of frustration and perhaps embarrassment. The holiday was designed to celebrate the Jews' liberation from the Egyptians. But in doing so it highlighted the fact that they were no longer free.

1. They were gathering to celebrate their liberation from their subjection to the Egyptians while they were living in subjection to the Romans.

2. The Passover highlighted their Roman problem. It also reminded them that their long-promised Messiah – the one who was going to rule and reign in the lineage of David – has not yet arrived.

IV. I have been at Christ Church over twenty years. On most Palm Sundays I have repeated this story. And so, some of you know some of the key details pretty well:

A. That interest in Jesus was very high. The crowds following him had always ebbed and flowed. He would perform miracles (or embarrass the religious leaders) and the number of those following him would spike. He would then talk about the cost of being his disciple and numbers would drop. As he marches towards Jerusalem interest is at an all-time high. People are still looking for the Messiah, and the Vegas bookies say everyone's favorite this year is on Jesus. The belief is, he will be the one to unite them to defeat the Romans. Which means, the first question is. will he show up?

B. You also know that He does show up. That's what John 12 reports. Indeed, he made a grand entrance. Even though he likely could have walked into Jerusalem undetected. In a world before selfies, Facebook posts or even newspaper articles, not many people knew what Jesus looked like. So, He could have slipped in without them knowing he was there. But he didn't. He staged a parade. In a move clearly designed to play up his claim to royalty he did what Solomon had done 1000 years earlier on the day of Solomon's coronation as King – he rode into the city on a donkey.

C. You know that in response, the people went wild. They put down cloaks for the donkey to step on, waved Palm fronds and chanted Hosanna. They did this because it looked to them as though Jesus was going to do for them what they were hoping – that is, defeat the Romans.

D. You may also know that the parade made Pilate sick. In his mind it confirmed that Jesus had the popularity to stage a revolt and that he was gearing up to do just that.

1. The Jews were governed in a complicated way. Caesar was over the entire Roman Empire – which was huge and sprawling. It covered parts of Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East. And he ruled via all kinds of different arrangements. Over the regions of Palestine he had placed:

- a) Herod (who was not a Jew) as King.
- b) He had also placed Pilate as governor.
- c) And he was allowing the Jewish religious leaders to have a governing council – called the Sanhedrin.

2. All of that to say, Pilate had the most power and he had the military and it was his job to keep the peace. Which meant, the worst week of his year was Passover, because the city overflowed with partiers who were focused on freedom. Pilate didn't live in Jerusalem, but he showed up there every Passover to be on hand in the event of a revolt.

E. When Jesus stages a parade, it's as if he is showing Pilate what kind of support he has and just how easily he could unleash a crowd that would overwhelm Pilate's limited forces. Rome is much stronger and would win in the end. But it would take weeks for Pilate to get reinforcements. If Jesus organized the people, Pilate's forces would be defeated. The crowd that turns out for Jesus has to turn Pilate's blood cold. It looks bad for the Romans.

F. But then, on Monday, instead of pressing his advantage, instead of keeping up the assault on Rome – Jesus does not stage a revolt, he goes to the Temple and attacks the Jewish leaders instead.

1. He blasts them for profiting from the sale of sacrifices. Then he sets up outside the Temple and starts healing people and forgiving them of their sins – advertising that He was better than the Temple. In so many ways, Jesus makes it clear that was the new temple. He was the nexus where God and man met.

G. As you likely know, it doesn't stop there. The high stakes drama continues all week and it will eventually lead to Christ's death.

H. We have a few events happening this week to walk you through the week:

1. On Wednesday night there is a Passover demonstration at HP.

2. On Friday there is open communion and Stations of the Cross at LF and CR
 3. On Friday PM there are Good Friday services at CR, LF and VH;
 4. There is a sunrise service at the LF campus on Easter and then normal service times at all sites next week – but you need a reservation. Please sign up.
- I. If you know the story – know how Jesus fails to launch the revolt and loses the support of the crowd, you know that by the end of the week he manages to be on just about everyone’s bad side and will be crucified. And you know:
1. He did this for us. For you.
 2. He died in our place.
 3. He did this to fulfill the plan. He did this to fulfill the prophecies.
- V. You might also know some other things:
- A. You might know that it’s a big deal that Jesus rode on a donkey.
1. In part because we don’t have any record of him riding at all. He walked like everyone else. So the fact that he set himself apart like this now is important.
 2. In part because Solomon -- another King of Israel – had ridden into Jerusalem for his inaugural parade on a mule. You would expect a king on a gallant steed. Solomon had gone the other way. Jesus does as well. This would not have been missed by the people.
 3. But mostly because it fulfills the prophecies made about Jesus recorded in Jeremiah 9.
- B. You might also know that it’s significant that they waived Palm Branches because the palm leaf was a bit like the flag of Israel. The last time the Jews had been free was a hundred years earlier when a revolutionary named Judas Maccabeus had led them to victory over the Greeks. Maccabeus had adopted the palm branch as a symbol of his victory.¹ In fact, he had the coins of the day stamped with a picture of palm fronds. So it’s not so much a plant as it is a symbol of national pride. When the crowd rushed to get palm branches to waive at Christ they were making a political statement.
- C. You might also know how perfectly Christ’s death completes the story.
1. That his triumphal entry happened at the time the Jews were told to bring the Passover lamb into the city.
 2. That all of this was foretold in Isaiah 53.
 3. That the way the Jews had been taught to kill the lamb – without breaking any bones – is the way Jesus died. That even though most who were crucified had their legs broken, including the two thieves killed alongside Christ – Jesus did not.
- VI. Well, let me underline two things for you today.
- A. First, I want to remind you that all that this was done was done for you. Be encouraged. Be relieved. Rejoice. God had a plan for our restoration and He carried it out in the most amazing way. He became one of us. For God so loved the world that He gave his Only begotten son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have ever lasting life.

B. And second, I want to suggest that in addition to being our savior, Jesus is our teacher and guide. He is our example. And I want to note that just as this moment is a hard one – a challenging one. I want to recognize that just as this moment – one that combines COVID Burnout, racial discord, political acrimony and several other things – that just as this moment is unsettled, the first century was unsettled as well. And Jesus modeled a path forward.

C. Hear me out. First of all, understand that the key thing Jesus does – the first thing we should focus on, which does not need to be done again – is He is the sacrifice that puts an end to the need for sacrifices. No one needs to be crucified again.

D. However, understand that Jesus calls on us to follow his lead and serve. To love and care for others. He brought a radically new ethic. He turned everything upside down by using his power for others. He used his power to absorb some of the pain and suffering in the system.

VII. Let me shine a different light on this passage than one you may have seen before.

A. Let me note that with the parade, Jesus advertised his political power – he had the ability to mobilize the masses. He showed Pilate who was in control.

B. Let me note that with his interchange at the temple, Jesus advertised his spiritual power – by healing and forgiving people he made it clear to the Jewish leaders that he was in control.

C. If we looked further ahead we would see that at the time of his arrest – when the soldiers show up to arrest him and Peter takes out a sword and hacks off part of one of the soldier’s ears and Jesus said, Are you crazy. If I needed this kind of help I could call down a legion of angels to fight for me – with this he tells us that he had all of the military power he needed.

D. And then in his interview with Pilate – on Friday - we see that on the face of it, it looks as though Pilate has all the power and Jesus has none. But it’s just the opposite. If you read that account you see that Pilate is stressed and Jesus is calm. The text reports on the back and forths. Pilate does all he can to get out of dealing with Jesus: he sends him to Herod and then he tries to get the crowd to ask for his release. When that doesn’t work, he has Jesus whipped and then he tries to talk Jesus into moderating his stance. In that Friday afternoon exchange we read that after the Jewish leaders that Jesus die because he claimed to be the Son of God, that Pilate “was even more afraid.” In verse 9 we are told that he went back inside the palace. “Where do you come from?” he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰“Do you refuse to speak to me?” Pilate said. “Don’t you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?” Jesus answered, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.”² It’s clear, Pilate is agitated. He doesn’t feel like he has any options he likes. Jesus is calm. Jesus is the one with power.

E. But, he doesn’t use it for himself. He uses it for the good of others. And in the kingdom of God, that is what power is for.

VIII. Discussions about power have been going on for at least 3,000 years.

A. This is part of what we find the Greeks discussing - Plato and Socrates talk about power: What it is. Who has it. Who should have it. How should it be used.

- B. The Romans keep the conversation going. Read Cicero
- C. Machiavelli famously writes about power in *The Prince*.
- D. Lord Acton gives his dictum: Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.
- E. Power is what is being debated and fought over in Washington DC right now.
- F. We could spend all year looking at discussions about power. From the vantage point of the Bible:
 1. On the one hand, power is one of the three big character assassins. It stands alongside sex and money as one of the principal ways that people who are undone are undone.
 2. But it is not seen as a bad thing – it is seen as a good and necessary thing – when it is stewarded well and used to benefit others.

IX. Let me make four statements:

- A. You have more power than you realize. We tend to not see the agency we have. Because we are limited beings, it often feels like we do not have the power we need. There is a sense in which this is true. We are limited and finite. But, you have more power than you know.
- B. Power is hard to manage well. Acton was right. It seduces and misleads. But it can be used well – and that generally means it is used for the benefit of others.
- C. Finally – and here I pivot back to my opening discussion about the way things are “unsettled” – part of the way forward is for the people of God to drink so deeply of the Gospel, to be so encouraged and uplifted and at peace and settled – that we can use our power for others. We are free to serve, to give, to love, to absorb some of the pain in the system.

X. I desperately want you to focus on the Gospel this week. To marvel at who Jesus is and what He has done for you. To focus on the cross so you can rejoice in the empty tomb.

XI. I also want you to not stop there. I want to invite you to help take some of the anger and pain out of the system. There are a lot of people who are tired and short and who are likely to snap at you. To power up. To try to dismiss or cancel. There is a lot of suboptimal behavior out there. This should not surprise us. Let me encourage you to take pain out of the system in any way you can. Let me encourage you to love others, to serve others, to not return anger with anger.

XII. This is counter cultural advice. Most of the advice you are likely to hear about how to survive COVID Burnout is: take a break, have fun, go on a walk, pace yourself, see a therapist. I am not against any of those. But I want to invite you to take a step higher. To be an agent of grace, hope and love.

XIII. I’ll leave you with an image. It’s one I ran across this week in something Miraslov Volf, a Croatian theologian wrote about. His home country has been a mess his whole life, and so he has written a lot about war and tense moments. And he encourages people to be like a tree.

A. He notes the remarkable image of a tree in the closing pages of Scripture – in John’s description of the New Jerusalem he writes about "the tree of life." But he ends – Rev. 22:2 – talking about “the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations"

B. And in his reflection he notes that in a common grace way, trees quietly absorb CO2 and release Oxygen so that everyone can breathe.

XIV. I want to encourage you – challenge you during this moment when tensions are climbing – to focus on the Gospel and then think like a tree.

1. 1 Macc. 13:51; 2 Macc. 10:7

² John 19:7