

“Behold the Man,” John 19:1-16a (Palm Sunday, March 25, 2018)

Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him. ² And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe. ³ They came up to him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” and struck him with their hands. ⁴ Pilate went out again and said to them, “See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him.” ⁵ So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, “Behold the man!” ⁶ When the chief priests and the officers saw him, they cried out, “Crucify him, crucify him!” Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him.” ⁷ The Jews answered him, “We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God.” ⁸ When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid. ⁹ He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, “Where are you from?” But Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰ So Pilate said to him, “You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?” ¹¹ Jesus answered him, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin.”

¹² From then on Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out, “If you release this man, you are not Caesar’s friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar.” ¹³ So when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Stone Pavement, and in Aramaic Gabbatha. ¹⁴ Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, “Behold your King!” ¹⁵ They cried out, “Away with him, away with him, crucify him!” Pilate said to them, “Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar.” ¹⁶ So he delivered him over to them to be crucified.

PRAY

Today is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week. Next Sunday is Easter, and today we finish our study on the gospel of John. We started it back on January 8, 2012, to be exact, and today is the seventy-eighth and final sermon on this book.

Our text for today, the first sixteen verses of John 19, tell us about the final stage of Jesus’ trial before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, and how Pilate made the decision to crucify Jesus. And I think the best way to get at this text and try to explain it is through the lens of power.

I don’t know anyone who doesn’t naturally want more power over their life. Every parent I know really struggles with wanting more control over their children. Not because these parents want bad things but because they want their kids to avoid the mistakes they made and instead make better decisions.

I don’t know anyone who doesn’t naturally struggle with wanting more power over their money. Not because they are unusually greedy, but just because they want to make sure they and their loved ones are provided for.

And I don't know anyone, especially someone who has been sick or injured, who doesn't naturally want more power over their health. They want to feel better. They don't want to be so limited in what they can do.

Everyone sooner or later desperately wants more power over their lives. And when you do, you have two options (and these two options are the two points to my sermon): first, you can grab onto one of the world's methods of getting power and hope for the best. Or, second, you can trust in Jesus' power.

First, the world's methods of getting power. For ten years, from 26-36 A.D., Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor, the procurator, of the province of Judea, which included the city of Jerusalem. As governor, Pilate literally had the power of life and death over the people of Judea. He had absolute authority and control. If he wanted money, he could go to the people he ruled and get it. If he perceived a threat to his position, he could send his soldiers out (he had thousands stationed in and around Jerusalem to prop up his rule) and eliminate it.

Yet we read this in verse 8: when Pilate heard that the Jews (and more on who the Jews are in a moment – the word “Jews” does not here refer to the entire nation of Israel), when Pilate heard that the Jews wanted Jesus crucified, “he was even more afraid.” The Greek text on which our English translations are based does literally say “even more afraid,” but it doesn't make much sense in the context of John because up until this point there's no hint Pilate has been afraid at all. Rather, I think the best way to understand verse 8, and this is also a legitimate reading of it, is that it says, “When Pilate heard the Jews wanted Jesus dead, he became afraid instead of giving them what they wanted.”

The question, though, is this: why would Pilate be afraid of the Jews? Because while Pilate did not answer to anyone in Jerusalem, he absolutely had to answer to someone in Rome – Caesar Tiberius, the emperor of the Roman Empire and the most powerful man on earth.

Pilate held the power of life and death over Judea, yet Tiberius held the power of life and death over Pilate. Pilate held his position at the will and pleasure of Caesar, and as far as Caesar was concerned Pilate had a three-fold job description: keep the peace in Jerusalem, keep the tax money flowing from Jerusalem into Rome, and not spend too much of Roman blood and treasure in the process.

That wasn't easy. He could not afford to be too lax in his rule over Jerusalem, because then he couldn't collect the taxes Caesar wanted from the province. But he couldn't be too strict in enforcing Roman rule either, because then the Jews would revolt and lots of Roman soldiers would die putting the revolt down.

It was a difficult balancing act, and other governors failed before Pilate and others failed after Pilate. Pilate eventually failed himself. He was recalled to Rome just a few years later for mishandling a different situation, and he was forced to fall on his sword, literally. History tells us that Pilate committed suicide after being recalled from Jerusalem.

What can we learn from Pilate? ***It is a losing game to think that somehow if you just climb high enough in your profession or make enough money you can gain enough power to protect yourself from the bad things that might happen to you.*** Pilate couldn't do it. And, you know, not even Caesar himself had that kind of power. I'm reading a history of the Roman Empire right now and one thing that has struck me is how many Roman Emperors, the most powerful men in the world, died. Caesar Tiberius probably died of natural causes, old and full of years. But the next six Caesars after him were either murdered or committed suicide because they knew their assassins were on the way.

I don't care how much power the world says you have, you will never have the kind of control over your life you think you need. It was true then, and it's true now. You may think that President Obama and President Trump have very little in common (and they probably don't). But one thing they've both repeatedly said is how frustrated they are at the limitations of the office of the President of the United States. Go and look it up – they've both remarked that there were so many things they've wanted to do while in office, and yet unable to do it because of Congress, or the Supreme Court, or the press, or some other interest group or hindrance.

If it's true for them, how much more true is it for you and me? Friends, you and I do not have any real power over our lives. We want it, we'd do anything to get it, but we can't have it.

In Luke 12, we read this: “And he [meaning Jesus] told them a parable, saying, ‘The land of a rich man produced plentifully, ¹⁷ and he [the rich man] thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’” ¹⁸ And he said, “I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ ”” Luke 12:16-19.

How many times have I thought to myself, “You know, if I just had X amount of money (usually, some number between half a million and five million dollars), then I would not have any worries anymore. I could do whatever I wanted with my life, I could spend more time with my kids, I could guarantee they'd have whatever they needed. My wife and I could really spend time on our relationship and grow closer together while we traveled to all these places. We could really help people. If someone we knew had a financial need, we could take care of it and wouldn't have to hold back. If only I had that kind of power over my life.” I don't know how many times I've thought that but it's a number that, if I knew it, I would be embarrassed by it.

But here's how Jesus ends this parable, which is known as “The Parable of the Rich Fool.” “But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’” ²¹ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.” Luke 12:20-21.

No matter how much money or power you have, it won't stop cancer. It won't heal a broken heart. It can't prevent traffic accidents, or guarantee wealth, or that your kids won't rebel. You can't control someone else's heart. And you know ... *you can't even control your own heart!* For some of you, this past week you did something you really did not want to do, you knew you

shouldn't do it, but you did it anyway because *you just couldn't help yourself*. Trying to get control over your life through that kind of power is a losing game.

But there's another method of getting power we see in this passage. ***It's the method of the Jews.*** Now, when John the apostle uses the word "Jews" in his gospel, he almost never means the entire nation of Israel or the Jews as a distinct race or ethnic group. A lot of people have taken John to mean that, and it's led to a lot of anti-Semitism over the years. But John was not anti-Semitic. He himself was a Jew, all the other disciples were Jews, Jesus was a Jew. They did not harbor racial bigotry against themselves.

When John uses the word "Jews" in John 19, he's using it in a specific sense to refer to the Jewish religious leaders: the high priest, the Sadducees, the Pharisees. Out of respect for John and his terminology, I'll use the word "Jews" that way for the rest of the sermon.

These Jews exercised power over Pilate. It's odd at first to think of them having power. The Jews want Jesus dead, but we read in verses 6 and 7 they are reduced to begging Pilate to make that happen.

But then we read verse 12: "From then on Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out, 'If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar.'" John 19:12. Pilate wants to release Jesus, but he can't. It looks like he has power but he doesn't.

Can't Pilate just say to the Jews, "You don't like my decision to let Jesus go? Talk to these soldiers with the swords and spears"? He can, but Pilate knows where a confrontation like that will lead. The Jews were not known for backing down. ***They were known for their willingness to fight for their beliefs.*** They believed the promised land belonged to them, not Rome, they believed they alone were God's chosen people, and they believed a Messiah was coming who was going to put them back on top.

And these Jews, these religious leaders, were convinced Jesus was not that Messiah, so they wanted him dead. Pilate knew when the people of Jerusalem got their backs up about something they could start a riot, it could get serious in a hurry, and that could cost him first his job, and then his life. So Pilate backed down – he gave the Jews what they wanted.

The Jews had power even over Pilate because they had religious convictions, and they were willing to stick to them. Now, isn't it a good thing to have religious convictions and stand by them? Absolutely – I am a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is my job to preach the Bible, so if I didn't have religious convictions I'd be committing fraud every Sunday of the year.

I want us to have convictions. I want this church to believe the Bible and stand for it, to always be faithful to give an answer for what we believe. *But we must acknowledge the terrific amount of pain that has been brought into this world by people who thought they were merely standing by their religious convictions, when instead they were hurting people and it was unnecessary.*

I've known, and I'm sure you have known, parents who thought they were being faithful to the Bible in raising their children by demanding things of them that, really, were nowhere to be found in the Scriptures at all. And when their children transgressed those rules, instead of forgiveness they found only anger and condemnation.

Now these parents believed they were doing the right thing. But as it turned out their children as they got older rebelled against the Christianity of their parents or wound up crushed because they couldn't keep the rules. Now please hear me: I'm not blaming every case of a child that had a hard time on the parents. I've seen parents too lax with their children as well, but that's another sermon. Children have a will of their own and they certainly grow into adults who can make up their own minds. I have four children that have yet to leave the home, and they may yet have a long list of grievances against me when they grow up. But we've all seen this, haven't we? Religious convictions strongly held by parents but had nothing to do with the Bible and unnecessarily led to pain and destruction.

The Jews were sure about their religious convictions, but it turns out they were wrong about Jesus. They said he wasn't the Messiah, but he was. They rejected God's own son. And all I'm saying is we need to be so careful with what we say are our religious convictions because we might be wrong. I've seen parents do it, I've seen husbands take the wrong stand on religious convictions with their wives, trying to force them into doing things they didn't feel comfortable doing.

I've seen pastors take the wrong stand. I know of one instance where a pastor wanted his congregation to make a really big change in how they did things at their church. It wasn't a sinful thing he wanted the church to do, and if everyone in the church was excited it might have been a great thing to do, but the church was very divided over it. So before the big vote the pastor came before the church and said, "My plan is a God-sized vision for our church. All the alternatives to my plan are just man-sized visions. We need to get on board with what God wants our church to do." He was basically saying, "If you don't vote with me you're voting against God." He went too far when he said that.

You don't have the power to change people's hearts, *but with religion you can manipulate and guilt a whole lot of people into doing what you want them to do.* The Jews did that with Pilate, and if you're here this morning and you're not a Christian it's probably not because someone sat you down over coffee and convinced you with their careful arguments to become an atheist. Here, in Mississippi, it's probably because there were some religious people in your past who were hypocritical and tried to manipulate you with their religion and you said, "If that's the way Christianity works then forget it." If that's you, I just want you to hear one pastor say that he knows that kind of stuff goes on, it does not honor the God of the Bible or his son Jesus Christ, and I'm sorry.

When we use worldly methods of power, we will either be disappointed with our lives (because we can't keep the bad things from happening) or we will wind up hurting other people. Neither pleases the Lord. What we must do instead is, second, trust in Jesus' power.

In John 18 and 19 it doesn't look like Jesus has any power at all. He's arrested, he's tried before Annas, then Caiaphas, then Pilate, then Luke tells us he was tried before Herod, only to be sentenced by Pilate. Jesus is beaten, he is flogged, he is mocked, he's scourged, he's crucified. He looks like he has no power because at first Jesus doesn't even answer Pilate (that's verse 9).

But when Pilate, in his fear, comes to Jesus and in verse 10 says, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" Jesus can't let that slide. He says in the first part of verse 11, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above."

Jesus wants Pilate to be absolutely clear about one thing: you have no power, and I have all the power. No matter how it looks to Pilate or anyone else, Jesus is in complete control. You say, "How can that be?" In John 10:17-18 we read where Jesus says, "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again."

Jesus before Pilate, looking totally out of control, is actually in complete control *because this is where Jesus wants to be*. The Bible says that Jesus is very God of very God, he is God in the flesh. He came down to earth so that after living a perfect life he could die on a Roman cross. Why? Perhaps Colossians 1:21-22 puts it best: "And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²²he [Jesus] has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him [meaning God]."

Jesus lived a perfect life, but we have not. We've sinned and broken God's law, so we are alienated from God. But by his death Jesus destroyed the power of sin over all people, and through faith we are reconciled to God. We can go home to our Creator who loves and cares for us.

And if you here this morning and you're not a Christian so you're not sure about Jesus being God or about his death on the cross doing anything for your relationship with God, keep coming back. We'll talk more about that, we'll address your doubts. I'd love to talk more with you during the week if you're open to it.

But for the Christians in the room who do believe it, I just want you to do one thing: *look at how Jesus used his power and copy him*. Jesus had all the power, and he gave it up for you and me.

Christians, we must not hoard our power to try to protect ourselves against the misfortunes of life. It didn't work for Pilate; it won't work for us. Our job is not to keep ourselves safe from job loss or cancer or broken hearts, but, like Jesus, to spend our power on behalf of other people.

You say, "That's hard, J.D." Well, it is, until you remember that Jesus is going to use his power to bless you, and Jesus has all authority on heaven and earth. He's committed himself to taking care of you and he'll do a better job of it than you ever could. If you're out there and you think, like I too often think, "I can't afford to give any more money away or commit any more of my time to serving others because I've got to hold onto it for myself," and you're a Christian, you know what you're like? You're like a billionaire who is stressing out because he might have to

spend twenty dollars. It's ridiculous. **In Jesus Christ, you have the resources of the universe at your disposal, so it's foolish to worry or hoard.** *Trust in Jesus' power to provide for you and use your power to bless others.*

And quite frankly we don't need any more Christians trying to control and manipulate other people. Our job is to love and accept everyone, regardless of whether they agree with us or not. That doesn't mean we approve of everyone's actions – absolutely not. Christians can't go along with lying, with greed, with sexual immorality, with exploitation or with children going hungry. It certainly doesn't mean parents don't set rules in their house in accordance with the Bible. But everyone should be able to approach Christians and find loving attention without becoming someone they're not. We don't have to manipulate anyone into getting them what we want them to do. Jesus has the power, he's in control, he's the judge, so all we have to do is love and bear witness to the truth. It's not our job to change other people, it's not our job to try and force them to agree. Jesus has the power, and he will do that in his time.

I love Daniel 3. That's where we read about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They refuse to bow down to the golden image King Nebuchadnezzar set up in Babylon, so they are cast into the fiery furnace. You know the story – they went into the fire, but they were not burned. When they came out, they didn't even smell like smoke. But I love how the old King James puts it. It says the king and his counselors and advisors gathered around and saw Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, “upon whose bodies the fire had no power.” How did that happen? Because there was a fourth man in that furnace, who looked like a son of the gods, who protected them.

Friends, because on the cross Jesus endured the furnace of God's anger at sin, you will not be burned up by anything in this life. Yes, you will suffer, but that suffering will not destroy you – Jesus promises it will only refine you, make you better, make you more like him.

Do you believe that because of Jesus the fires of this life have no power over you? Then don't rely on your own power! Trust your life to Jesus and spend your life for others. PRAY