

JESUS-SHAPED LEADERSHIP IN UNCERTAIN TIMES (LIKE PANDEMICS!)

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As Jesus sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" And Jesus answered them, "See that no one leads you astray... But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only." (Matthew 24:3, 36)

We live in uncertain times. The coronavirus. A plunging stock market. Cancelled flights. Closed borders. Schools and workplaces shutting down. Empty grocery shelves. It can feel like this is a new thing, but it is not. The truth is, life in a broken world is always uncertain and disruptive. While most of us have never experienced these dynamics before, the fact is that unexpected and upending disasters have been a constant of human history.

When his disciples asked him what the future held, Jesus warned them of sudden and calamitous events to come: *"wars and rumors of wars," "nations will rise against nations," "famines and earthquakes," "tribulations," "lawlessness,"* and *"false prophets."* It didn't take long for Jesus' followers to experience these very things.

Some sixteen years after Jesus said this there was a massive famine that hit Judea and so affected the early Christian community that Paul carried out an extensive relief effort among the new Gentile churches to help the believers in Jerusalem (Romans 15:25-28). Forty years later rebellion against Rome broke out among the Jews which resulted in Roman legions destroying Jerusalem and slaughtering large swaths of the population, just as Jesus predicted. Sixty-two years after that a second Jewish revolt resulted in all the Jews, including the followers of Jesus, being driven out of Jerusalem by the Romans.

While Jesus warned his disciples that these kinds of experiences were coming, he repeatedly told them that there is no way to predict exactly how and when disaster will strike. What he did tell them is to prepare for these challenging times by being focused on doing the Father's will no matter what is happening in the world around us. So then, what does it mean for those of us who follow Jesus and lead others to *"stay awake"* and be *"faithful and wise servants"* in times of turmoil and uncertainty? Here are six lessons I am learning about Jesus-shaped leadership in times of crises, like a pandemic:

1. **A Non-Anxious Presence:** Jesus said, *"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on.* (Matthew 5:25) The followers of Jesus are by definition people of faith which means we are certain of things we cannot yet see. Although we don't know what specific events will happen or when they will come to pass, we do know our future destiny and that the One who will

bring it about is incredibly good. This means, in the face of unexpected challenges, we can live in peace and hope as fruit of the Spirit, even if we feel fear or dread in our flesh. Those of us who lead must model what it means to exercise faith in a good God during uncertain times, even as we are open about our very real human experiences. Faith comes by hearing and it is those who are listening and responding to what God is saying in times of crisis who find the faith it takes to help others navigate seasons of uncertainty.

2. **Gathered and Scattered:** From the very beginning believers followed Jesus' pattern of gathering and scattering. The first church in Jerusalem gathered in the Temple courts to hear the teaching of the Apostles and then scattered to extended family homes to share life and carry out the mission of Jesus. When persecution hit, the followers of Jesus were scattered out of Jerusalem to Samaria, Cyprus, Antioch, and north Africa just as Jesus had foretold before he ascended into heaven. This is how the movement of Jesus began to spread. For many of the first three centuries Christians were not able to gather in places larger than an extended family home and yet the movement was unstoppable! Why should it be different in our time? Maybe the current restrictions on large group gatherings will help us to recapture this healthy and fruitful rhythm of a decentralized church that knows how to function in both large gatherings and in extended spiritual families? We can take the opportunities God is giving us in this season to become a more Jesus-shaped church.

3. **An Anti-Fragile Church:** Some mechanical systems are so complex and dependent on each component working a certain way that it only takes one small disruption to bring the whole thing to a screeching halt. Think of the copier in your church office. All it takes to bring it down is for one tiny part to fail. The fact that the copier repair person knows everyone in your office by first name tells you it is a fragile system. Organic systems are quite the opposite, what we call "anti-fragile." Biological organisms are designed to thrive under pressure. Some parts of your body, like your bones and muscles, actually require stress in order to remain healthy and become stronger. The early church was a profoundly anti-fragile system which only grew stronger the more it was subjected to stress. When our church programs rely exclusively on an elite few to lead them and a public gathering place to hold them, it becomes a brittle, fragile system. This is an opportunity to learn how to operate as a spiritual family with a network of vital relationships where everyone is being trained to lead someone so that our churches become a more fruitful, adaptable, and vital movement of God's Kingdom, especially in times of disruption and uncertainty.

4. **A Balanced Wisdom:** Stress and uncertainty tend to polarize people who don't have a solid foundation. When we are afraid, we move toward either extreme reactions or irrational denial. Should we hide out in our homes hoarding toilet paper or ignore the warnings of health officials and party at the bars? Uncertain times create dilemmas we must face and navigate wisely. The Word of God, both the written Word of the Bible and the living Word of Jesus speaking to us through the Holy Spirit, is an unchanging, unshakable Rock on which we can stand and discern the will of God in disorienting times. When we are isolated, we can lose sight of reality and fail to rightly interpret the data we receive. When we live in community and benefit from the wise counsel of the saints, we gain perspective and insight. This is why it is so important to listen to God's Word and hear other perspectives of faith before we face the roar of news outlets and social media! Are you trying to lead by yourself? Are you listening to

the wrong voices? To lead effectively in times of uncertainty we need listen to the Spirit speaking to us through God's Word and God's people.

5. **Abiding and Fruitfulness:** Jesus was very clear that good and lasting fruit comes from intentional connection to him. He also explained that those branches on his vine that bear fruit will get pruned in order that they might bear more and better fruit. The frenetic pace of our modern western culture often keeps us from the consistent abiding that would dramatically increase our fruitfulness. As public institutions shut down and we practice social distancing it is clear that this is a season of pruning meant to give us an opportunity to slow down, rest, and take more time to connect with God and the people closest to us. We will squander this opportunity if we simply isolate ourselves, nurture fearful stress, and try to escape by bingeing streaming and social media. Jesus-shaped leaders set an example for those they lead by modeling this Way of Jesus and teaching their people how to establish predictable patterns of abiding in God's Word and Spirit. Don't miss this opportunity which will lead to greater fruitfulness!

6. **A People for Others:** When we are subjected to threats, our natural survival instinct turns our focus on ourselves and our own needs. When Jesus was on the cross, his moment of greatest crisis and disorientation, he comforted a dying criminal and ensured his mother would be recognized as part of the spiritual family. This was the final expression of Jesus' consistent orientation toward caring for the well-being of others. The German martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from a Nazi prison cell called Jesus "the man for others." The early church followed this pattern of Jesus' life and become known as those who showed extraordinary love and generosity, even toward those outside their own community. The Antonine Plague of the second century and the Cyprian Plague of the third century wiped out a huge part of the Roman empire, but the followers of Jesus became known as those who courageously cared for and ministered to the sick and dying. What are the opportunities for us to love our neighbors in this pandemic even as we exercise wise discernment? When we take our eyes off ourselves and consider how we can show others the love of God we are learning how to lead like Jesus.

I believe with all of my heart that times of challenge and suffering are when the true church of Jesus shines! I am so grateful that we don't have to live in fear even when we feel anxious and don't know exactly how or when challenges are going to come. I am so glad we don't have to face it alone when the crisis hits. If you are called to lead others in the midst of uncertainty, keep your eyes on Jesus, listen to what the Spirit is saying, share the journey with others who are doing the same, and he will show you the way forward.