

True Power – Amanda DiMiele

1 Kings 8: (1, 6, 10-11) 22-30, 41-43; Psalm 84; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

I have always loved our psalm for this morning. It just has some great lines, you know? “My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord...Happy are those whose heart are the highways to Zion...they go from strength to strength...for a day in Your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.” It just makes you feel good, you know?

It's no coincidence that this psalm appears alongside the other readings we have this morning. It is a song for those on pilgrimage, anticipating their visit to the same temple we see dedicated here in our 1 Kings passage. The place where God dwells. This is one of those climactic passages of Scripture. Already in the story God has brought his people out of Egypt and promised to abide with them forever—he as their God and they as his people. God has anointed David to rule over them, promised David that God would never take his steadfast love from his line, and that David's son would build a house fit for God. Now that house, the Temple, is complete, and distantly, we witness the placing of the ark into the inner sanctuary, and immediately, the presence of the Lord comes dramatically upon the place. This is a story about promises fulfilled—about God's faithfulness to abide with his people forever.

Of course, not even Solomon thinks that the fullness of God actually dwells in the Temple. The wise king reasons in v. 27, “Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!” No, Solomon more realistically goes on to pray that God's eyes would be open and night and day toward the place. Those visiting the Temple and praying there would enjoy God's real presence, yes, but no one believed that the house, however magnificent, actually contained the fullness of the almighty God, creator of heaven and earth. That would be ridiculous.

If we keep that really quite solid thinking in mind as we move to our Gospel reading, I think we can understand why Jesus' audience is for the most part less than receptive to him. What we see here are glimpses of the scandal that is Jesus' incarnation—the ridiculous idea that not only something earthly, but someone fully human, is also fully God.

Let's back track in John 6 a little. These past several weeks we have been slowly making our way through this chapter which begins with the feeding of the 5,000. The people loved Jesus then, because they interpreted the miracle as the sign that Jesus was the long-awaited messianic king. To them, that meant he would be the mighty political figure who would finally liberate Israel from Roman control. They were so convinced that we see them in v. 15 trying to take Jesus by force to make him that king. But Jesus refuses. He was, frankly, a

disappointment to them. Far from rising mightily as a banner for Israel, he withdrew into the mountains, apparently unwilling or unable to be the power they wanted.

They, however, would not be so easily deterred. The next day they sought Jesus out, but instead of performing more signs he starts talking nonsense about being the true bread sent from heaven—and it did sound like nonsense to them, who knew of Jesus' very human birth—and so they begin to lose interest. What Jesus is offering them is not what they expected, and not really what they want. They even get offended, because it's beginning to sound like blasphemy. Last week Bob pointed out the strange-to-us language Jesus uses when he talks about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. As he mentioned, the way this language about flesh is being used indicates that God's own life has become the life of the body of Jesus. Moreover, William Barclay's commentary on John would remind us that the reason Jewish people do not consume the blood of animal was because blood represents life, and all life belongs to God. When Jesus says to drink of his blood, then, the implication is that the people should take the life that belongs to God into themselves.

When at the end of all this the disciples in our passage this morning observe, "This teaching is difficult," it's quite the understatement. Let's break this teaching down. First, Jesus is claiming the ridiculous—not only that his life and flesh belongs to God, but that his life is the life of God, and that in him, God became flesh. Second, he invites others through him to participate in this impossibility, to eat and drink the life of God so that their own flesh—useless in itself—might be filled and made new, alive with true life that comes from the Spirit of God. This is radical, because it relocates the place of God's sure presence from the Temple to human beings. We know that the early Church recognized this shift. Paul, in 1 Cor. 6:19, asks, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God?" This is a very big deal. No longer is God's presence in a house we might visit; now, we are the temple of the living God, and he is as intimate to us as our skins. Remember the poetry the Psalmist created in anticipation of a temporary pilgrimage to the Temple? Imagine the poetry that would burst from the Psalmist's lips at *this* thought.

Now on the one hand, this is wonderful news—God is as near as possible to us. But on the other hand, when we stop to think about it, it is a little counter-intuitive, even aside from the obvious question of how the transcendent God, who remains transcendent, also manages to be so close. A Temple just sounds sturdier, you know. A safer, more protected place. We humans are so fragile, our sense of self always so ambiguous, our bodies so breakable, our emotions so volatile, undependable. And this site, our humanity, is the site that God has chosen to dwell on earth.

So what does all this mean—this difficult and wonderful truth that John's language here in chapter 6 reminds us we encounter every time we come to this table, the truth that God's presence is here, in these elements and in us in reality, not only symbolically or in memory? I think there are two things we constantly need to bear in mind: what God is like, and consequently, what we who are filled with God are to be like.

So first, what God is like. In a word, God is often counter-intuitive, not what we expected or even necessarily wanted. In particular, we say that God is almighty and powerful, and I believe this is true, but we must be careful what meanings and images we attach to this word power. Too often I think we forget that God's power is not the same as our violence, which we mistakenly name "power." And as a side note, by "violence" I don't only mean physical abuse. I mean when we look down on others, attacking them in our mind or with our words spoken to friends; when we lie and cheat and blackmail and intimidate to get our way; and so on and so on. We call this violence power, and we imagine God operates similarly in his power. We want and expect God to sweep down with a mighty flaming sword and strike down injustice, just as Israel expected the Messiah to come in might and to do battle to free the nation from worldly powers. We are like those following Jesus after the feeding of the 5,000, trying to force God to be the king we want, the king we understand to be just and true. When God resists, it feels to us indeed like he has withdrawn into the mountains, breaking his promise to abide with us, to be *here* for us.

Of course, that's not true. If there is anything sure we can claim about God from Scripture, it is that God is faithful. Sometimes, though, the way in which God chooses to abide, outside our comprehension of justice and power, offends us, as it offended even Jesus' disciples. The challenge in this Christian life is constantly to fight our impulse to project our own violence onto God and instead to remember what God is really like—the God we see in Christ, who would die to show us that because of who God is we do not need to participate in the cycle of violence this world would have us believe necessary if we are to see justice and peace. Remember, Christ came into the age of the Pax Romana, the Roman peace, which Rome maintained at all costs, by any means of brutality and violence. A high price, for a false peace. That is not our inheritance.

No, we must remember who we are and how we are to behave as the ones in whom God's presence dwells on earth. This movement—remembering what God is like and thus what we are to be like—is exactly the structure of the book of Ephesians, which we have been working through over the past month and a half. You'll remember that it opens on a cosmic scale, God setting plans for us before the foundations of the world. It moves to God's inclusion of the Gentiles into the promise that belongs to Israel, the fulfillment of the sentiment already foreshadowed in our 1 Kings passage this morning. It narrows further to practical concerns—what Christian marriage represents; how we are to be wise and united in the Church; and so on. Ephesians focuses especially on the idea that power does not belong to the rulers and authorities of this world. Power belongs to God. And this true power, God's power, is what we are to arm ourselves with, which brings us to our passage this morning.

I think when we read Ephesians 6 we tend to puff out our chests and get very macho imagining ourselves armed to the teeth with this mighty power of our God. And I think we read over the interesting juxtaposition that occurs when after constructing this symbol of power, Paul identifies himself as an ambassador in chains. Seems pretty weak by a soldier's standards.

So God's power does not look like the world's violence, but what does it look like? The answer is obvious enough: love. And we know God's love—which I am suggesting is the same as God's power—by his abiding presence. God's power in love lies in his absolute freedom even, to use Craig Keen's language, to transgress his own integrity: the eternal became finite; the invincible shed blood; God became flesh. What power that God is not bound even by his own nature. That is our inheritance. That is the power made available to us in Christ at this table—that in love, we might not be bound by our own natures.

But let's be honest. As we leave this place with our much more concrete anxieties, with our griefs caused by people whose violence seems quite powerful indeed, and with griefs and fears that do not even seem to have a source, these words too easily become nice, but empty, sentiments. But this is when we need most to remember. Our task as a community, Christ's body, is to stand firm as a witness to the truth that God's power and God's love are two names for the same thing which is realized through God's abiding presence. And it won't always make sense, and it will be frustrating, and in many cases it is the most appropriate thing in the world to rage and weep and cry out like the martyrs in the book of Revelation, "How long, O Lord?" But even still, we must act as I imagine Peter acting in this passage. With a helpless shrug, and a note of desperation in our voice, we pray, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

This is a hard affirmation to make in the face of a difficult teaching. So I want to leave you with a few short excerpts from a prayer written by Walter Brueggemann after a time of great fear, the tragic events of 9/11. Let's pray.

"Lord God, in the midst of our anxiety, confidence wells up. In our present stress, old well-being echoes. We speak and the world turns confident and grateful, not because we believe our own words, but because of your presence, your powerful, bold, reliable presence looms large, larger than fear, larger than anxiety, large enough...and in our small vulnerability, we give thanks."
Amen.