

Power and Glory

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Texts: Exodus 33:12-23; Exodus 40:1-4, 8-15, 33c-38

Power and glory are chief concerns for many people in our time – and not only here in the United States. Power has to do with the ability to exert your will – to get done what you want done. Glory has to do with reputation. So when you think about it – power and glory are at the root of the U.S. issues with North Korea, some of our issues with Russia, and certainly are some of the chief concerns of the president. But he is not alone in that. Power struggles occur in statecraft, in business, in family life, in the church. And reputation – what others think of us – is something almost everyone worries about, and is also often a source of conflict. Who remembers the Smothers Brothers? What was one of their main topics of conversation? “Mom loved me more.” That’s a claim that involves both power and glory.

But in these passages in Exodus, while they are partly about God’s power and God’s glory, they are mostly about how Moses and the Israelites are experiencing the power and glory of God. The question in these chapters is “How will God be present to Israel?” and a question throughout Exodus has been “What is the nature of God?” These are questions we are still asking – how can we know God? and still, what is the nature of God? And these questions also have to do with power and glory.

Consider some of the issues along the journey – right from the beginning, when Moses first encountered God in the burning bush, Moses wanted to know what he should tell the Israelites and the Pharaoh about who had sent him, and he needed demonstrations of God’s power. Again and again God has revealed divine power to the people of Israel – in the plagues, in the parting of the Red Sea, in the water coming from the rock, and the manna from the heavens. And God has been present to them, leading them – visible in the pillar of smoke by day and the pillar of fire by night. Yet when Moses and God went up the mountain for Moses to receive the Ten Commandments, the people were afraid because of the absence of God – and built the Golden Calf. And God and Moses were both angry with the people, and God suggested that perhaps he shouldn’t live among the people. But between the Golden Calf episode and our first reading today, the people seem to really turn around. They become faithful – they worship God, and seek God’s advice. They support Moses spending time with God. And then, in our first reading, Moses seeks to see God. His experience of God has led him to want to know God more fully. And God’s response reminds us that even though God comes near to us, even though God is always present to us, God is more than we imagine, more than we could grasp, and indeed, more than Moses could see. God allows Moses to catch a glimpse of God’s goodness... but God explains that no one could experience the fullness of God.

And so in our second reading, we learn that the building of the tabernacle becomes a way for God to be present to Israel, and for Israel to be present to God. It is a gesture of

intentionality by God and God's people – a recognition that although God is always present with us, both our faithfulness and God's are shown in our choosing to turn our attention to one another. We do this in worship, turning our attention to God, seeking God's guidance, bringing our confessions and praise to God. We do it when we have a consciousness of serving God in mission, joining our efforts to what God is already doing among us. We do it in prayer, turning our attention to God's presence, sometimes with words, sometimes with pure attention.

We finished the book of Exodus with today's reading. We will continue the Exodus journey with some readings from Deuteronomy over the next four weeks – Kent will preach next week and I'll preach the following three weeks. But we've finished the journey through the book of Exodus that we began on August 27 – we've only hit the high spots, but we have begun at the beginning and ended at the end of the Book of Exodus, if not of the Exodus journey.

And so what have we experienced in Exodus? And what have we learned about God's presence and God's power and glory? And is the experience in the book of Exodus consistent with our experience of God today?

Clearly, in Exodus there are amazing experiences of God's power – I've recounted some of them. But from the beginning, what God stressed with Moses was not God's power, but God's presence. Let's go back to that first encounter that Moses had with God at the burning bush. You remember how it went – Moses was tending sheep and saw a bush that was burning and yet was not burned up. And as he drew near to see what was going on, he heard God call him from within the bush. And God told him to go back to Egypt and lead the people to freedom. And Moses asked, "Who am I to go to Pharaoh and to bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

And God answered, "I'll be with you." And throughout the book, God is with Moses and the people. And remarkably, God leads them in a clear, unambiguous visual way: as a cloud of smoke during the day and a cloud of fire during the night. God's presence with them was unambiguous and unmistakable. In fact, there are times where the people are disturbed by God being so close, it makes them nervous.

In that respect, our experience is not at all like the Exodus experience – many of us don't have any kind of clear experience of God, and even among those who do have an experience of God, it is usually subtle or rare or both. Mother Teresa, who had an experience of God early in her life, didn't have another experience of God's presence for ten years, and then never again for the rest of her life. Her experience was one of yearning for God, wondering whether God had abandoned her. Most of us have to, like Teresa, trust in God's presence without sensing God. There are some among us who do have a sense of God's presence, but nothing even close to what Moses and the Israelites experienced. We have no clouds guiding us, no voices from the bush or the mountain. Their experience does seem to be unique in the Bible. Indeed, in the book of Numbers, God says that no other prophet will have the experiences of immediacy that Moses had. And yet, God's presence continues to be promised throughout the rest of the Bible.

But, even the one who is closest to God, Jesus, when he speaks of God's presence seems to say clearly that God's presence will not be clear to us. When he talks with the Pharisee Nicodemus who comes at night to meet with him, he speaks of God's presence using the Greek word *pneuma*, which means breath and wind and spirit and is translated variously as one or the other. I'm going to read what Jesus says using all three words, wind-breath-spirit, not making an arbitrary choice about what Jesus meant. He said, "The wind-breath-spirit blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. It's the same with everyone who is born of the wind-breath-spirit." Jesus seems to be telling us that God is with us, and we may hear God, but we won't know from where, or to where God is going.

What Jesus does seem to show in his ministry is his own deep trust in God's presence, but Jesus spends a lot of time, intentional time, in prayer – paying attention to God. Jesus seems to suggest that we grow in our experience of God by serving God, by loving our neighbors as ourselves, by trusting God instead of worrying about the details of our lives. And in that, his message is consistent with the message of Exodus: trust God and follow God. And despite what those around him want, Jesus does not seem to have much interest in exercising power.

So what is our understanding of God's power? I've discussed this once before, and I think it's important, so let me just repeat some of what I said then, about 2-1/2 years ago:

The idea of God being omnipotent, or all-powerful, is taken for granted by many people, but it is an idea that, according to evangelical theologian Tony Campolo, is nowhere found in the Bible. Yep, you heard me right – the omnipotence of God is apparently not a Biblical idea. Who knew?

Now, if you're like me, the idea of God being omnipotent is kind of an "of course" – of course God is omnipotent – you know, God is omniscient, omnipresent, omnibenevolent, and omnipotent – God is all-knowing, all-present, all-loving, and all-powerful... except... what if God isn't? Perhaps you will find this idea unsettling. I know I did. It came up in a class I took three years ago (now 5 years ago) as I began my doctoral program, and I shut it right down. It challenged something I had taken for granted. It took me two years more to be ready to grapple with the idea – so about 3 years ago now, I started thinking about this seriously and reading about it. And the first thing I came across was an article by Tony Campolo which said that omnipotence was not found in the Bible, and I thought wow – if an evangelical pastor and theologian could say that, it must not be such a heretical notion. This was important to me, because I try to make a practice of not preaching heresy.

So, again I ask – what would it mean to conclude that God is not omnipotent? The first thing that leapt to my mind was that it sure would simplify the theodicy issue – theodicy is kind of a technical theological term, but it basically is about the question, how is it, if God is all good and all powerful, that evil exists? You can see, I'm sure, why this is a theological problem – if God is all powerful, and can keep bad things from happening to people, but God doesn't do that, then

is a God really all good? If God could prevent ISIS from beheading children in Syria and didn't, if God could have prevented the holocaust and didn't, if God could steer a tornado away from a hospital and didn't – well, you get the point. If God could prevent evil and doesn't, that presents a problem for some folks. And I get their point. I mean, you and I aren't all good, but most of us – if we had the ability to prevent a tragedy, most of us would do that. So the theodicy issue is a real one for most of us.

And part of the problem for us is that we assume that God is all-powerful, because that is the classic picture of God, but if God isn't protecting people, then what's the point? If God can do this and isn't – if God is all-powerful and all-loving, and isn't keeping the worst, most violent and hateful violence away from people, or isn't protecting innocents from natural disasters like the tsunami of 2005, then what does God do for us? It's a problem.

But as we think about this issue, what really seems to emerge is that the center of the problem is how do we define power? And I think most of us think of power as some kind of forcefulness, the power to make things happen – coercive power. The power to force the Pharaoh to release the Hebrew slaves, the power to inflict plagues upon Egypt, the power to part the Red Sea and then bring it back upon the Egyptian army, destroying horses, riders, and generals alike. When we think of an all-powerful God, this is part of the picture.

And if that's the sort of power that we associate with God, points out McCormick seminary theologian Anna Case-Winters in her book *God's Power*, then our theology validates that kind of power. And yet, most of us have grown to understand Jesus as exercising a different kind of power – healing power, the power of love, compassionate power. We end up having the same problem as some of the people in the time of Jesus – we want a God who will exert power to make things right. We want a God who will fix things. We want a God who will protect the world. We want a God who will change situations. And it seems that we have a God who will only change us – and expects us to participate in the process. We wouldn't do it this way. In fact – we don't do it this way. We still try to change other people to meet our expectations, instead of perhaps changing our expectations, changing ourselves. Even when we pray, it is often asking God to change a situation, instead of sitting quietly in God's love, allowing God's love to change us, one brain molecule at a time, or working with God to change ourselves one willing, loving act at a time. What if God's power is the power of deep compassionate love? What if God's power is activated when we cooperate with God, granting others and ourselves the deep acceptance and love that God has for all of us?

I have come to understand that God's power is indeed the power of deep compassionate love, despite the different kind of power on display in Exodus. And actually, it is indeed the persistence of God's compassionate love that is the most amazing power in Exodus. God's commitment to their freedom vastly exceeded their own, and the same is true for us. God loves us, God is standing by us, and God persists in hoping that we will choose to participate in that divine love for our own freedom and the transformation of the world.

Amen.