

Strength for the Powerless

Isaiah 40: 21-31 Mark 1: 29-39

No one wants to be powerless, yet it happens. If a storm is coming, you can make all the preparations you want, but once it hits, you're mostly powerless to do much about it. You can't stop the wind or the rain, or keep trees from falling or the flood waters from rising. You have to deal with it and make the best you can of a situation, using whatever power you may actually have as inadequate as it may feel.

If a loved one is deeply sick, even terminally ill, you have that awful feeling of powerlessness. You have to trust the medical staff, the hospice staff, the people who deal with such instances too often for their liking, but who have made it their profession to use whatever power they have to make things work. You, however, will typically feel powerless, reduced to doing stupid little things because that's all that's left, to wipe a nose or mouth, to summon a nurse, to hold a hand, to express a reassurance that you may not feel that keenly about. You know that you're powerless, and it sucks. It's also incredibly stressful. The caregiver to a loved one can easily make themselves sick in such situations. It's a rotten place to be, and many of you have had experiences like that, and at our ages, probably more than once.

God never intended us to be powerless. In the second creation story in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were given all kinds of authority and power with only one apparent restriction. Of course, one was all it took for our ancestors to screw up. They were rather stupid about it all. Really, how smart is it to have a conversation with a talking serpent in the first place? Then how dumb is it to accept its advice?

God's preferred status for God's people is empowerment. God's promise to be with God's people is an affirmation that the power and presence of God will be with us, empowering us to act faithfully. When God's people are rendered powerless, it is not what God really wants, like enslavement in Egypt, or even as punishment with the exile in Babylon. God's promise in his human creation gets fulfilled when God's people are empowered to act faithfully, to grow and discover the richness of new life.

Since we have all known what powerlessness is like, how frustrating, exhausting, and demoralizing it can be, then we simply need to expand our understanding of the feeling and apply it to whole groups and communities of people.

Groups of people who are made powerless are made that way by systems that are created to perfect the condition of powerlessness in order to benefit the powerful in some way. That's how riots and rebellions start. People who are made powerless by systemic forces suddenly, like a spark to gasoline, explode in a blind fury.

In Sunday School, reading about Daniel, we noted the installation of a statue of the emperor, Antiochus Epiphanes, in the most holy and sacred Jerusalem Temple so that the emperor could be worshiped. The people who had been beset and made powerless by systemic forces rebelled to start the Maccabean War.

Bearing such history in mind, we turn to the initial chapter of what's called Second Isaiah in Isaiah 40. At this point, the people have been in exile in Babylon for several generations so that the homeland has become a distant memory at best, but for most, the stuff of the stories of elders alone. These are people resigned to their fate in bondage, as aliens, as refugees, having given up hope that their God can or will act on their behalf. Isaiah's message challenges the status quo of Babylonian superiority and the autonomy the Babylonians claim for themselves and the power they believe their gods have provided. Isaiah announces a different word: the power of God, the sovereignty of God, and the empowerment of those faithful to God.

Isaiah reminds them: all that you see is our God's glorious creation and our God has complete sovereignty over all of it. Yes, God is even sovereign over the great empires and emperors. Isaiah says: *[Our God] brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble.*

Isaiah speaks the word of history. These are not invincible worldly powers. They are passing, always passing – something Americans should always remember. Earthly governments and worldly rulers are passing and insignificant compared to the God of the faithful.

The rhetorical questions are posed once again, this time by God: *To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?* Nothing in heaven or on earth compares or even comes close.

After making his case for the absolute sovereignty of God, Isaiah turns to the complaints of the people who have been powerless, enslaved and oppressed for decades now. Worn and weary, losing hope, and with their faith dissolving, the prophet summons the people to find their strength and promise in the one God of their fathers – of Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah.

History shows God's providence for these pillars of faith. The admired youth and their energy – reflected in new empires and new emperors – they will lose their strength and stamina – passing into exhausted decline – long before the covenant people faithful to God **ever** grow tired. In fact, the faithful who hope in the Lord – *They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.* The worldly greats will not only pass away, they'll **pass out** from exhaustion while the faithful will fly, soaring effortlessly. Those who are steadfast in faithfulness will recognize God's blessing in their lives.

When we fail to see beyond the dismal present and a darkened past, hope is foreclosed and our perspective is fractured. We grovel in powerlessness. Our spirit is burdened with sadness, worn out from struggle. We stand broken and in need of healing.

“Don’t you get it?” the prophet cries out. Lift up your eyes and see what your God has done before and can do right now. Emerge from the trap of your own small perceptions, cast off the shackles of powerlessness and embrace faith in the power of your God. Just when we should be seeking the strength of God and the power of faith to lift us out of our entrapment or enslavement, we turn away from the good news gospel that would come to life around us and through us.

In Mark’s gospel, we pick up from last week with Jesus leaving the synagogue where he cast out the unclean spirits. He goes directly to Simon Peter’s house where Simon Peter’s mother-in-law was bed-ridden with a fever. That Simon Peter’s mother-in-law was living with him indicates that she was likely a widow, powerless and dependent on Simon Peter for her well-being.

At the touch of Jesus’ hand on hers, she is suddenly freed of the fever and commences serving them. Having been rendered powerless by the fever, but also powerless by being a widow dependent on family, she’s made whole by Jesus and instantly becomes a servant of the Lord. While we may get fixated on Jesus’ act of miraculous healing, like it was some magic, we would do better to pay attention to the widow’s restoration to wholeness, to the empowerment by Jesus that transforms the powerless, dependent widow into a purposeful servant of the Lord. That’s the real story.

We learn that the whole town has massed around Jesus, seeking his healing. Jesus finds his own spirit is so burdened by his success that he has to secretly - in the middle of the night without telling anyone - withdraw to a solitary place simply in order to pray and be with God. Our translation says “Simon and his companions went to **look** for him.” A more accurate translation is that “they **hunted him down**” like prey.

When they find him, they’re dismayed that Jesus withdrew; “Everyone is looking for you!” As far as they’re concerned - in their limited view of what Jesus’ agenda is - he’s hugely popular and amazingly effective, all the elements of **complete success**. He’s already lining them up the way John the Baptist did. This is no time to be sneaking off to be alone. He’s really doing something here. He’s a star!

This week, the healing of the sick is coupled with casting out demons. Here again, Jesus refuses to let the demons speak because they, too, knew who Jesus was. Jesus is the one who makes demons powerless while empowering the God’s people with healing.

With the success of his ministry here, Jesus may be disoriented himself. On one hand, the disciples seem content to have stay put, and indeed he is doing wondrous things in healing the sick, **but is that his ministry? Is that who he is, a healer?**

By the time his disciples track him down, Jesus’ call is clear once again. He’ll move on to preach the good news of God’s kingdom *and* he will cast out demons. It’s interesting that preaching and casting out demons are twin aspects of Jesus’ ministry; they go hand-in-hand. Clearly, there are demons that stand in the way, fully opposing his preaching of God’s kingdom, and his empowerment of the weak and excluded. Jesus’

mission is to go and bring both the demons as well as the weak and powerless his gospel of love, grace, and peace.

And let's make sure we don't miss **where** we find those demons. We hear it again here, a repetition of what we heard last week: the demons are in the synagogues, worshipping there. They aren't hiding in the bathroom or in closets or under the floors. They're worshipping in the sanctuary with everyone else. That seems an odd place to find demons, doesn't it? It would seem that the demons have found a comfy, familiar home with and among God's people. It's a very strong reminder to the faithful in churches that the demons will find happy homes with and among God's people today.

God's promise in Isaiah finds its parallel in Jesus. As Isaiah 40:29 says: *[The Lord] gives power to the weak, and strength to the powerless.* God's work in bringing new life to God's people in Babylonian exile, urging them to repent and turn in faithfulness to the God who empowers and upholds the weak and powerless, reminds them that their God is with them. Their God has plans for them; their God has placed the sacred promise in them. God overcomes the passing powers of the world who sought to keep God's people weak and powerless. God's promise shall not be denied.

Jesus' ministry opens in Mark as Jesus reaches out to the weak and powerless on one hand with healing to bring new life. At the same time, Jesus confronts and casts out the unclean spirits and the demons who populate the religious establishment, the ones who have overseen making God's people powerless, weak, and excluded. The healing and empowering word of God from the prophet, and the healing and life-giving sharing of Jesus all have the same purpose: God's promise of new life, empowering God's people who have been made weak and powerless by the sinful powers of the world.

Healing in scripture is not so much about medical miracles that we're tempted to superficially interpolate as divine cures for what ails us and others. Healing in scripture is about strength for the powerless, like the outcast widow.

It also means exposing, challenging, and even dismantling the sinfully contrived practices that afflict God's people, the unclean spirits and demons that have supported and maintained systems of oppression, exclusion, and exploitation.

This is God's concern here, that each person – whoever they are or whatever they are – may soar on eagles' wings, who may run and not grow weary, as the promise and power of the Lord is made alive for all of God's people.

May we be partners in bringing strength to those rendered powerless, and ready to cast out the unclean spirits and demons who would deny God's promise to anyone.