



Message by the Rev. Michael Burke

Epiphany I

[Isaiah 42:1-9](#); [Acts 10:34-43](#); [Matthew 3:13-17](#); [Psalm 29](#)

POWER

And the Great Reversal of God

Good morning.

Well, it's been quite a week, hasn't it?

Let's talk about "power," shall we? The issue of power, and the nature of power, runs through the various scripture readings today like a fine connecting thread.

And of course, our news feeds this week have been all about power:

The **military power** of the United States, wielded to enter the territory of a sovereign nation Of Venezuela, remove the purported leader and detain him in a facility 2200 miles away in Brooklyn New York.

Presidential power, as later in the week, the elected leader of the United States pointedly remarked that the only limit to his **global power** was his "own morality."

State Power, as in Iran this week, the authorities boldly asserted their capacity to curtail civil liberties as Iranian federal agents shot at protesters and cut access to the internet amidst widespread anti-government protests.

And of course, the very disturbing display of **power dynamics** unveiled in the encounter between a citizen and a Federal agent of the Immigration, Customs, and Enforcement agency in Minneapolis, in an interaction which directly led to the shooting death of 37-year-old Renee Nicole Good, whose last recorded words were "I'm not mad at you."

And then, **narrative power**, as immediately in the wake of the killing, we saw the **power** of certain officials and media spokespersons shaping a narrative about how we should make sense and meaning of a series of videos, videos that it was actually possible for us all to watch and see for ourselves.

Power. Power. Power.

Let's start with the Holy Scriptures, because that's where we are best grounded.

Let's begin, actually, with the Psalm. The very first verse of today's Psalm 29 begins

"Ascribe to the Lord, you gods, *

ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. And then it goes on, in the form of a poem about God's power.

The psalmist describes the glory, strength, and power of God in the poetic images of a mighty storm rolling in from the Mediterranean. First out upon the waters, the God of glory thunders, and the voice of the Lord is a voice of splendor.

Then, as the storm makes landfall, it breaks the cedar trees. Moving further inland, the storm shakes the wilderness of Kadesh, the place where Moses, as told in the Book of Numbers, strikes the rock as it brings forth water, and the same place where the bones of Miriam and Aaron are buried.

This power makes the "oak trees writhe" and "strips the forest bare." The imagery is of awesome power and ferocity, and, importantly, the passage ends with the pronouncement that God shall be a source of strength for the people, and shall give to them "the blessing of peace."

In a world that teaches us incessantly that peace is achieved through coercion and force, the Psalmist in our liturgy then passes it to the Prophet Isaiah to proclaim God's very different understanding of "this concept of peace and blessing."

All this imagery of storms and tempests made me smile as I thought of the poster of a young woman figure with long flowing hair, which is hanging on my niece Brittany's apartment wall. It says, "The devil whispered in her ear "you are not strong enough to withstand the storm." She whispered back "*I am* the storm."

So, having established the immensity and reality of the power of God, let's turn now to the reading from the Prophet Isaiah.

In this Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, written some 500 years before Jesus, the Prophet Isaiah speaks to the people of Israel as they are far from home, held in oppression and captivity in the Babylonian Empire. In what biblical scholars call "Second Isaiah," the prophet is deeply concerned about power and justice, but presents them in a counter-intuitive way, much different than the world (still) teaches us.

Rather than highlighting or even celebrating "power-over," that of military domination or coercive strength, the Prophet reorients the understanding of true power in terms of faithfulness, liberation, and the restoration of the people and nation of ancient Israel to their rightful appointed role. This role is given by God, and it is as "a light to the nations," and as the restorer of right relationship between people and nations, and between rulers and those who are led by them. This role, Isaiah reveals throughout these chapters, is to bring order out of chaos, faithfulness to one another, and a profound care and protection of those who are vulnerable or powerless.

God's power is the capacity to absorb, withstand, and transform a malevolent force into something healing and good. It is the capacity to love without coercion, to heal without domination, and to bring about Shalom (peace) by "salvation." "Salvation" is understood in Hebrew scriptures as the restoration of wholeness, right-relationship-in-community, and justice.

It's the world's primary idea of power stood on its head. Completely upended. The Great Reversal of God.

Chapters within Second Isaiah speak of God's "Servant," moving back and forth between suggesting the Servant is to be personified as an individual, and stating that it is the role and responsibility of the people and nation as a whole. The Servant is powerful, but not in the usual ways that we think of power.

In the passage we heard this morning,

"a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice."

This introduces a new understanding of power:

- as moral authority rather than physical force,
- faithful witness rather than coercive manipulation, and
- walking alongside the poor, the oppressed, the weary, the forgotten, and those in exile rather than seeking the benefits and approval of the people and forces that rule and direct the Empire.

Through it all, God through Isaiah reinforces the understanding that God's power is not neutral, but rather God definitively "takes sides" on behalf of the poor and the vulnerable, and God's power through the Servant aims to bring about healing, compassion and justice throughout the world. The blessing of peace spoken of by the Psalmist is imposed not by might, or force of arms, but perennially emerges where God's love-n-community is practiced and lived out – personally, socially, economically, and globally.

Are you still with me? I know, this is deep and heavy stuff.

Then let us move ahead to the second reading, in which Peter is preaching and instructing the people.

In a passage that bible scholar Mark Trevick, Professor of Reformation Theology and History at Luther Seminary calls "profoundly controversial", Peter declares that God shows no partiality but finds acceptable all those who hold him in reverence and who do what is right in God's eyes. Peter goes on to teach that God has anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with *power*, and *in him* is forgiveness and reconciliation with God. And, lest we forget, the context of Peter's teaching is the

presence and inquiries of Cornelius, who as a centurion, was the very embodiment of Roman military ideals. And then, Peter gently guides Cornelius into a new life in following the way, not of Rome but of Jesus. And, to highlight the contrast of choices and commitments, Peter then proceeds to... ..what? Baptize Cornelius.

And finally, that brings us to the very Gospel of the Day, for which this feast day of the celebration of the Baptism of our Lord is named. Jesus, the one called “sinless,” nevertheless models not dominance over John, but submits himself in voluntary self-limitation, and says “Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” (Matthew 3:15). It is a direct echo of the theme of Second Isaiah, and the Servant figure who does not assert power-over, but transforms the heart from the inside out, carefully strengthen and shielding the wayward sinner, the vulnerable and the bruised.

And to bring it “all the way home,” “close-up and personal,” right into our own very intimate and messy lives, this baptism of Jesus is the very same baptism into which you and I were baptized. Even as we follow in the Way of the One who was crucified by the powers of this world, we are called deep into the heart of God’s Servant of old. The Covenant enacted and sealed way back then, is the baptismal covenant we recommit ourselves to today (and I would argue) each and every day we draw breath.

I believe that our baptismal covenant is about as far as it could possibly be from being just some quaint liturgical ritual in a church, perhaps even one that first happened on our behalf long ago when we were yet a child. It is, instead, one of the most profound decisions and commitments we can make, and it has profoundly far-reaching implications for how we live and move and have our being in this world.

No one can rightly say “I WAS baptized.” You can only say “I AM baptized.”

In just a few moments, we will together reaffirm our Baptismal vows – here and now - sacred promises to God and to and with one another. It feels both fitting and newly urgent after the week we have just witnessed. Our baptism has *everything* to do with the conduct of the nations. It has everything to do with our political choices and commitments. It has everything to do with how we make sense of the use of force and the violent death of any person, including our sister Renee Nicole Good who was killed by our brother Jonathan Ross.

It is both the personal and the communal call to follow, and trust, in the Jesus who said, “Blessed are the peacemakers.” Highly personal, but inextricably and forever communal as well. It is fundamentally non-sensical, in a genuinely “Christian” sense, to say you have a “personal Lord and Savior” and not also be deeply rooted in God’s beloved community.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury and one of the Western world’s premiere theologians, Rowan Williams, famously said, “In baptism, we are caught up in solidarities not of our own making.”¹

¹ Interestingly, this quote does not appear in his formal writings, but was spoken before a group at a conference and is widely attested to.

He continues: “The other great truth about baptism is that it brings you into proximity with not only God the Father, not only with the suffering and muddle of the human world, but with all those other people who are invited to be there as well. Baptism brings you into the neighborhood of other Christians; and there is no way of being a Christian without being in the neighborhood of other Christians.”

The first three questions of the baptismal covenant we will recite together invite us to reaffirm the basic orthodoxies of the faith in continuity with all who have come before us in the great cloud of witnesses that is the Body of Christ through time and space.

The final five questions call us deeply into the heart of what it is to be ‘in the neighborhood,’ that is , to be God’s servant and to walk in the Way of Jesus in the company of others. **Our decisions, our choices, our affirmation, our “yes!” is inseparable from the invitation to. completely transform and re-imagine what power is.**

Let me repeat that: **Our decisions, our choices, our affirmation, our “yes!” to our own Baptismal vows is inseparable from the invitation to. completely transform and re-imagine what power is.**

Our Baptismal Covenant calls us to be faithful to living out this new understanding that cuts to the heart of the use and misuse of power in a way unlike any other commitment that we are ever likely to make.

Do not expect that everyone will understand you if you choose to profess your vows to walk in this Way of Christ. Nothing will ever be the same thereafter.

Whatever form that your imagination believes the “devil” might take, I believe that the “devil” and the powers of this world whisper into our ear: “You will not withstand the storm.”

But the voice of the Spirit, the still small voice of the Spirit within us, the Voice of God’s own Self - whispers back in echoes of Psalm 29.

It whispers in compassion.

It whispers in Truth.

It whispers in defiance:

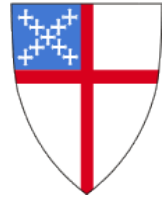
I am the storm.

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The Holy Scriptures Appointed for This Day

The Collect

Father in heaven, who at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit: Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.*



Old Testament - Isaiah 42:1-9

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;

I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.

He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;

a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.

He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

Thus says God, the Lord,
who created the heavens
and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth
and what comes from it,

who gives breath to the people upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it:

I am the Lord, I have called you in
righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;

I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,

to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.

I am the Lord, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to idols.

See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;

before they spring forth,
I tell you of them.

The Psalm - Psalm 29

1 Ascribe to the Lord, you gods, *
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.

2 Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his Name; *
worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.

3 The voice of the Lord is upon the waters;
the God of glory thunders; *
the Lord is upon the mighty waters.

4 The voice of the Lord is a powerful voice; *
the voice of the Lord is a voice of splendor.

5 The voice of the Lord breaks the cedar trees;
the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon;

6 He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, *
and Mount Hermon like a young wild ox.

7 The voice of the Lord splits the flames of fire;
the voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness; *
the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

8 The voice of the Lord makes the oak trees
writhe *
and strips the forests bare.

9 And in the temple of the Lord *
all are crying, "Glory!"

10 The Lord sits enthroned above the flood; *
the Lord sits enthroned as King for evermore.

11 The Lord shall give strength to his people; *
the Lord shall give his people the blessing of
peace.

The New Testament - Acts 10:34-43

Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ--he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

The Gospel - Matthew 3:13-17

Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."