

## **“Power”**

1 Samuel 16: 6-13

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The story we encounter in scripture today is a story of the rise and fall of a great power. It is a political story. In it we find a very different vision of power than the one we see in the culture. In the book of Samuel we see the grand picture *in which it is God* who raises up the powers and principalities in the world, and it is God who brings down.

Israel is undergoing a power transition, from tribal society to monarchy. Samuel is the prophet God has chosen to introduce the monarchy to Israel. The prophet in ancient Israel was a check on royal power, but the prophet Samuel functions as *much more than this*. God uses Samuel both to bring down the former king Saul **and** to set into motion events that will place David on the throne.

It is *God who is the source* of political power and activity. David comes to the throne, not through ambition or accomplishment, but through divine appointment<sup>1</sup>. David has no political endorsements, no friends in high places. His family has no royal connections.

At the beginning of the story, God has *already envisioned* his new king. God sends the prophet Samuel, somewhat unwillingly, to Bethlehem to anoint the new king, even before Saul is off the throne. You can imagine this might be risky business. Though fearful, Samuel does as directed and finds Jesse and his seven sons.

As the story unfolds, Samuel believes he has spotted the one God has chosen. The text tells us this is because Eliab—whose name means something like “Godfather”—is the eldest, the tallest, and the most regal looking.

The story continues in the first book of Samuel, the sixteenth chapter, beginning with verse 6:

***Then it came about when they entered, that he looked at Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed is before Him." But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. And he said, "Neither***

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Craddock, John Hayes, Carl Holladay, Gene Tucker, “Preaching Through the Christian Year: B”, p. 306.

***has the LORD chosen this one." Next Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one." Thus Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. But Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen these." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Are these all the children?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, and behold, he is tending the sheep." Then Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." So he sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, with beautiful eyes and a handsome appearance. And the LORD said, "Arise, anoint him; for this is he." Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David from that day forward.***

How are we to consider the powers and principalities of the world? How do we faithfully use the power God has given us? How do we chart the course, in our personal lives and in our collective life?

All you have to do is look in the newspaper, or watch CNN, to see how the culture answers these questions. Here's a sample from the week just ended<sup>2</sup>.

A Kentucky pastor is inviting his flock to bring guns to church to celebrate the Fourth of July and the Second Amendment. New Bethel Church is welcoming "responsible handgun owners" to wear their firearms inside the church June 27, a Saturday. An ad says there will be a handgun raffle, patriotic music and information on gun safety.

"We're just going to celebrate the upcoming theme of the birth of our nation," said pastor Ken Pagano. "And we're not ashamed to say that there was a strong belief in God and firearms — without that this country wouldn't be here."

The message? God plus guns equals great power.

A little closer to home. . .

Police have been seeing a growing number of financially strapped car owners are torching, sinking or ditching their vehicles and then reporting them stolen to cash in on the insurance. In Dallas County, suspicious auto theft reports have increased 12 percent this year.

Known as owner give-ups, the scams have increased even as auto thefts dropped nationally — a sign that the deepening recession is pushing the trend.

The message? The one with the cleverest scam 'gets away with it.'

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<sup>2</sup> First two stories drawn from msnbc.online June 10, 2009.

And, finally, the Washington Post reports a surge in the number of healthy students using bootleg pharmaceuticals to enhance concentration and short term memory. One study reported over 10 million students admitted using bootleg drugs in the past year to improve grades or test scores. As one student put it, "it's the difference between a 3.8 and a 4.0".

The message? Do whatever it takes to win.

These are cultural messages: stocking up a personal weapons arsenal, coming up with a clever scam, using drugs any way we want---help us win or get ahead or somehow achieve the 'good life'.

As Christians, these messages should disturb us. They should disturb us, and yet it is so easy to buy into this vision of power, because it truly does seem as if this IS the way the world works.

There is this big gap between what we experience in the world and what we believe. As Christians, we struggle to understand the contrast of how power seems to work in the world, with how we believe things *really are* in light of Christ and the gospel.

This is exactly the situation Samuel finds himself in when God sets him up to set out and find the next king. Samuel does what seems to come naturally. He looks for the guy who looks most like a king, and gets ready to crown him. He figures a tall, handsome eldest son named "Godfather" fits the bill.

But listen to God's reply: "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart".

"The Lord looks at the heart". These are some of the most memorable words in the Bible. In them, we see how differently God judges power and eligibility. Humans look at superficial things, but God looks inside. God sees the inward character. God sees hidden, and perhaps, undeveloped, traits.

Not having yet spotted God's future king, Samuel then proceeds through the rest of Jesse's sons: Abinadab, whose name means 'Ancestors', and Shammah, whose name means 'Hear and Obey'. But these three guys with important-sounding names---Godfather, Ancestors, Hear and Obey---are not what God has in mind. Samuel goes through seven of the sons, one by one, and God says, "nope, not him". "Not this one". Nope. No, no, no.

Until Samuel's checked all seven of them out and wonders if there's anyone missing. The youngest, caring for sheep in the field, is summoned and this, David, is the one.

In God's choice of the youngest of eight sons, we see how differently God operates. God's plan for power and succession varies from human expectation. Time after time, God chooses to raise up younger sons. We see this in the story of Isaac, in the coveted blessing of Jacob (the younger), in Joseph's rise to power in Egypt, in this anointing of David, and in the choice of King Solomon. We see this, ultimately, in the very Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Rev. Dr. Marian McClure talks about power in a lecture she gave a few years ago at Austin Seminary. Dr. McClure used to be in charge of WMD in the Presbyterian Church. No, WMD does not stand for weapons of mass destruction! The WMD is the Worldwide Ministries Division of the church, concerned with global hunger, disaster assistance, and human rights.

I share with you some things she had to say, because they speak directly to this question of how we consider worldly power.

Dr. McClure began her lecture with a story of when she was in high school. Her parents were bragging about her achievements to a family friend. Marian, they said, might well become the first woman president of the United States. Marian, of course, was mortified. Their friend turned to Marian and very seriously, asked, "*For what purpose do you want power?*"

*For what purpose do we want power?*

Whether we are aware of it or not, all of us, as Americans and as Christians, are being asked this very same question. We answer it by what we buy, how we vote, what we prioritize and what we jettison, by where our energies are spent and where our budget dollars are allocated.

*What is our power for?* We have not been completely faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ in how we have answered this question. All too often we have answered the question, "What is our power for?" with the answer, "It is for our comfort, for our security, our advancement". . .

If we are tempted to downplay our power, let's look at ourselves through the eyes of an historian.

According to Yale historian Paul Kennedy, since the end of the Cold War, the United States is functioning on the global scene with a degree of power and dominance that is unique in the entire history of humankind. Ours is the greatest power of all time, in an absolute league of its own. The powers second in line are *far less powerful* than we are<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> As discussed in Paul Kennedy's 1987 historical analysis, "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers" and as paraphrased by Marian McClure in her Settles Lecture "Divine Hedges 'round the Hegemon?" given at Austin Seminary 11/29/05.

If we are tempted to downplay our power, let's look at ourselves through the eyes of the global economy. Even middle class Americans enjoy a standard of living far and away higher than the vast majority of people on earth.

In her lecture, Dr. McClure lists ten ideas Christians bring to the table in this discussion about power. I will spare you the repetition of all ten! I share with you three I believe are most important<sup>4</sup>.

First, in our Reformed tradition, we understand **power as a gift** to be used for God's purposes. Power is not to be shunned, but to be channeled for God's purposes. Presbyterians have never shied away from power. Presbyterians are overrepresented in the U.S. Congress<sup>5</sup>. Presbyterians are among the wealthiest and most highly educated Christians in the U.S. today.

It is our Reformed understanding that all that we have, all that we are, comes to us by the grace of God. As Paul puts it in his letter to the church at Corinth, "What do you have that you did not receive?" (1 Cor 4:7) We also believe we are to use our gifts, including the gift of power, wisely for God's kingdom. To whom much is given, much will be expected (Luke 12:48).

Second, we Christians **know there is a power outside ourselves** at a time when there appears to be no power more powerful than the United States. We cling to the hope that there is indeed a higher power that will ultimately hold us to account. We know God's power is not bound by national or political allegiance. We know who the source of power is, and it is, thank God, not us.

Finally, the Bible offers a vision of power that is the **reverse of imperialism**. The long biblical witness, both in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament, describes the *mirror opposite* of human power. We have considered this today in considering the rise of David's power in ancient Israel. This great reversal is in numerous strains of thought in our salvation history.

This tremendous reversal is embodied in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The one who "did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant" (Philippians 2:7a). The one who told us to love neighbor, to feed the hungry, to welcome the outcast.

It is in how we share power with the least among us that we will be judged. In the revealing of our hearts our true identity is uncovered. In this era of unprecedented worldly power, we can take great comfort in the knowledge that

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<sup>4</sup> I acknowledge these three ideas are drawn directly from Dr. McClure's lecture. I have expanded upon them for the purposes of this sermon.

<sup>5</sup> Presbyterians are represented by 14% of the Senate for 2.8% of the population

ours is a God who does not look at the things humans look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.

This morning we celebrate Scout Sunday. Scouting is an institution which seeks to form character, to empower young people, and to teach them values which will help them steward their own lives and the life of the communities they will live in. Like Presbyterians, young persons who have been deeply committed to scouting often end up in positions of power and influence. I charge all of you here today, whether you are a scout or not, to consider how important your choices are for your future and for the future of our country and even our world.

May we who are faithful respond to the question, "*What is your power for?*" with the answer, "for God's kingdom to increase". May we who are, by worldly standards, very powerful, never forget we are commanded to use our power in the service of the Jesus Christ. We who have been given much will be called to account for how we spent the power we had.

We live in two realms. We are citizens of the world and we are citizens of God's kingdom. We move ahead, with one foot gliding along the halls of earthly power and one foot edging toward the heavenly realm. In this strange and divided citizenship, we keep in mind two things:

We will use our earthly power to build God's kingdom here, **and** we continue to hope for a new world---a world of upside power where prisoners are set free, where blind persons see, where the meek inherit.