

Names for the Messiah: Mighty God
Isaiah 9:2-7, Mark 1:21-28 and 4:35-41
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M. Michelle Fincher
Calvary Presbyterian Church

Throughout Advent we are looking at the four royal titles contained in the oracle of Isaiah 9 and specifically, at how those titles pertain to Jesus. Last week we considered “Wonderful Counselor.” Today we take up the second royal title, “Mighty God.”

It is easy to forget, sitting as we do 2000 years after Jesus’ life, that the early church struggled to articulate how Jesus was related to God. We have had the benefits of time and history to contemplate doctrines like the Trinity or a Christology of Jesus that affirms him as both fully human and fully divine. For monotheistic Jews of the first century, however, these were not easy truths to come by. The church did eventually come to confess Jesus as God, just as Thomas had done when he said, “My Lord and my God!” but it was not simple or obvious for first century Christians.

The Hebrew scriptures were written at a time when kings were in some sense regarded as divine, meaning that they carried some of the power that properly belonged to God and transcended normal human power and authority. The king bore responsibility for the prosperity of his people, a prosperity that would be marked by *shalom*, a peace and well-being that would pervade the entire kingdom. That meant that an effective king would assure that his realm would have victory in war, success in economics, productivity in agriculture and justice in social relationships.

In addition, the biblical requirements of Israel included that the king must practice economic justice toward the poor and needy. Psalm 72 gives us the flavor of what was expected:

May [the king] judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice.

May he defend the cause of the poor...give deliverance to the needy and crush the oppressor.

For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight. (Ps. 72:2, 4, 12-14)

But even with this royal performance, the gift of blessing was understood not to be in the power of the king but in the hand of God who “alone does wondrous things.” (vs. 18-19)

The word “mighty” in Isaiah’s title speaks to the bravery, boldness, and valiance that the king must have, especially in battle. These attributes enable him to remain steadfast in using his power to resist every threat and thus make his people safe. The king is expected to have uncommon courage and power in the execution of his office, not least as commander-in-chief.

The connection, then, between the early testimony concerning Jesus and how he relates to Isaiah’s royal title is not self-evident. After all, Jesus does not wield might in the same way that Rome does. He does not and will not compete with the power of Rome on Rome’s terms. Instead, Jesus insists that his power is not grounded in the usual authority of empire. It is not an authority that comes out of the end of a gun or in the drop of a bomb or in any other coercive or violent ways. His kingdom, like his claim to authority, is different from the kingdoms and authorities of the world. His is rooted in and derived from “the will of the father,” whose intention for the world is quite unlike the intent of Rome and every human power before and since.

So, we need to ask, “How did Jesus manifest and perform divine power? How did he exercise the energy and force to enact change, restoration and new life?” Two episodes in his ministry allow us to glimpse the mighty power of God that is exhibited in the life of Jesus.

In Mark 1 Jesus is confronted by a man with an unclean spirit. The way Mark narrates the confrontation, the man himself does not actively figure in the drama. The interaction is between Jesus and the spirit. The unclean spirit immediately recognizes Jesus and sees that he is a threat to his existence and to his function of debilitation: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” (1:24)

The unclean spirit identifies Jesus with a title of honor that matches the coronation language of Isaiah, acknowledging his divine power. Jesus responds to the challenge by issuing a double command that asserts his authority over the spirit: “Be silent, and come out of him!” (vs. 25) to which the spirit responds by immediately obeying Jesus’ command. The spirit didn’t want to come out of the man, but it was helpless before the mighty authority of Jesus. The response of the

crowd who observes this encounter is an acknowledgement of Jesus' authority: "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! Even the unclean spirits obey him."

The crowd does not yet identify Jesus' power as divine, but they ask the question. It is a question, however, that is posed in such a way that implies the answer. This is the Lord of life whose might results in healing, hope and renewal, in this case for the demon-possessed man. Jesus makes life possible by exercising mastery over the enemy of life.

The second episode is recorded in Mark 4. This time the threat to life is a storm at sea. As he had earlier, Jesus issues a terse double command to the wind and waves: "Peace! Be still! (4:39) The word is different, but it is the same command given to the unclean spirit. Jesus' work is to reduce the threat of the power of death, embodied as an unclean spirit and then as a storm. He reduces each of these threats to a meek, silent creature that submits to his authority. And again what follows his command is immediate obedience: "Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm." (4:39) After Jesus chides the disciples for their inordinate fear, we get the crowd's reaction: "And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'"

In both episodes, the key word is "obey." The unclean spirit obeyed him; the sea obeyed him. Clearly the two adversaries of Jesus, the unclean spirit and the storm, are forces of chaos and death. They are agents of "un-creation" that reduced the captive man to helplessness and the disciples to paralyzing fear.

Jesus contains and subjects these deathly, chaotic threats by creating space for new life, for the man and then the disciples. Jesus is the giver of life who performs the function of the creator God. In Jesus of Nazareth the world saw the power of God for life on display. It is power for life that is grounded in God alone, for life can come from nowhere else. All the various opponents of Jesus, including Rome, are agents of death. Power "from elsewhere," that is, from God, is required to combat and overcome such violent forces. And that power for life from God that is performed is indeed "mighty." It requires enormous force to resist the power of death. That capacity is exhibited by Jesus, displaying the truth that he is indeed God and mighty, the one who with fearless courage takes on even the last enemy, death, and faces him down.

There are numerous episodes of this same fruitful power for life throughout Jesus' ministry. When he commands the paralyzed man to "stand up and take your

mat and walk” or declares, “your sins are forgiven,” he is exercising lordly authority that makes new life possible. When he feeds the multitudes, he is declaring his authority over the wilderness and recharacterizing even it as a venue for abundant life in the realm of the creator. Psalm 103 provides a succinct doxological summary of the way God the creator enacts abundant life. He is the one:

who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases
who redeems your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
who satisfies you with good as long as you live.

In the gospels it is Jesus who forgives, who heals, who redeems, who crowns, and who satisfies.

In order that the actions of the “Mighty God” should not be “kicked upstairs into abstraction,” as theologian Walter Brueggemann so aptly puts it, it is critical to recognize that Jesus invites his followers to participate in these transformative acts. He commissions us to take part in the work of creation so that abundant life for all can be possible. He sends us out as his kingdom agents. He gives us the power of the Holy Spirit so that we, too, can go up against the powers of our age and bear witness to an alternative truth about the world. He invites us to proclaim a world in which the divine power of healing, forgiveness, restoration and well-being is on the loose, to tell about the presence we have seen and experienced in this “Mighty God.” Our telling continues to make that power available in the world.

We need to remember that the chaotic and unclean forces of our time have no chance against the Mighty God and those who act in his name. It took the early church a while to catch on—and it usually takes us a while, as well—but the truth is that the mighty power of God that enabled Jesus to rebuke the wind and the demon is the same power that was given to the church at Pentecost and is the same power given to us. And it is given for the same reason—so that we can stand against the forces that seek to enslave us in fear, division and death—and act, instead, as kingdom agents of life, light and truth.

So, what about you? Are there storms that are raging or some destructive, enslaving forces in your life that need to be addressed by Mighty God? Are you experiencing the power and authority of Mighty God in your life? And if not, what do you need to do this Advent season to prepare to make room for him in your heart and life? Amen.