



### **If You Think You've Got the Power**

John 18:33-37 with 2 Samuel 23:1-7; Psalm 132; & Revelation 1:4b-8

Christ the King Sunday, November 24, 2024

Aledo UMC

Pastor Dave Schultz

Back when Candice and I were in college, we played a parlor game called, "If You Think You've Got the Power." The game begins with a player who has "the power" who then recites "If you think you've got the power and you know you've got the power, please leave the room." Someone leaves and then the "power player" points to another participant. The person who left the room is summoned back in and if he or she really has the power, then he or she knows who the power player pointed out.

It can take awhile but eventually everyone gets the power. In the meantime, though, there's a lot of laughing and teasing about who does and doesn't have the power.

The game also appeals to a basic human desire for obtaining power, regardless of how silly that power might be. We all want power.

No doubt the world will see some rather frightening displays of power in Ukraine as outgoing President Joe Biden has approved sending anti-personnel mines to Ukraine for the first time in a major policy shift. The decision comes just days after the US gave Ukraine permission to fire long-range US missiles at targets in Russia, a shift that only occurred after months of lobbying from Kyiv.

And we continue to see frightening displays of power between Israel and the terrorist nations which surround her.

In our own society, money and power are closely linked. Perhaps that is nowhere more apparent than in the recent presidential campaign for the White House. Together, the two candidates

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for the White House spent \$2.7 billion, making this the most expensive in American history. When you throw in money raised by their political action groups, the total spent was over \$19 billion.

Power struggles play out everywhere you look. They can occur on the world stage or in a local organization with only a handful of members. I've seen churches members jockey for what they perceive to be a position of power in the congregation. And with the position comes control. And control is power, even if the only thing you're controlling are some pots or the ice machine or toilet paper.

There is a basic human desire for obtaining power, regardless of how nominal that power might be. We all want power.

Today is Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of the Christian calendar. The scripture lessons suggested for today all reflect on the nature of power *and* of powerlessness.<sup>1</sup>

If you followed along in the Parish Visitor, then you know that one of the readings for today comes from 2 Samuel 23 where, near the end of his life, King David declares:

'When one rules over people in righteousness, when he rules in the fear of God, <sup>4</sup> he is like the light of morning at sunrise on a cloudless morning, like the brightness after rain that brings grass from the earth.'

<sup>5</sup> "If my house were not right with God, surely he would not have made with me an everlasting covenant, arranged and secured in every part; surely he would not bring to fruition my salvation and grant me my every desire. (vs. 3b-5).

These words celebrate the covenant God made with David and with his offspring. I'm not sure if David realized it, but that covenant was intended to point us to Advent and the coming of Jesus Christ. He came to earth as the Son of David and he will reign on David's throne forever in fulfillment of God's everlasting covenant with David.

But God's covenant with David accomplished something else as well: it empowered David. He became king of Israel—that nation's most glorious king. He became the "gold standard" for all subsequent kings of Israel—despite his failings with Bathsheba.

But make no mistake about it: the passage also makes it clear that David's power was not his own. It was a power conferred on him by God. If God had not exercised his sovereign will, David would've never attained the kind of power that he attained. His power was derived from God. It comes to him as a sheer gift and his power depended solely on God sustaining that gift.

The contingent nature of that power is clear in Psalm 132. In verse 11 the covenant with David is reaffirmed; David's sons would occupy the throne forever. But that does not give David's sons carte blanche to abuse the power granted to them. There are two critical letters in verse 12 that make all the difference in the world: **I.F.**

*If.*

*If* your sons keep my covenant and my testimonies which I shall teach them, their sons also for ever shall sit upon your throne (vs. 12).

There is only one way to obtain power in the kingdom of God, and that is by fulfilling God's requirements. Bombs and rockets are ineffective, and money is worthless. And Micah 6:8 rather succinctly lays out God's requirements:

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

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<sup>1</sup> *Texts for Preaching, Year B* (WJK), pg. 596ff.

And that's what King David did as king. Second Samuel 23 describes David as "one who rules over people justly and in the fear of God" (vs. 3).

God is still in the business of empowering his people, and God empowers us to be vessels of his love and justice to the world around us. He never empowers us that we might serve our own interests. So the question for us becomes, "If you think you've got the power and you know you've got the power, how is God loving people through you?"

Kings of nations might assume that they have the power, but is that really the case? There's a fascinating power struggle between Pilate and Jesus in John 18.

<sup>33</sup> Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

<sup>34</sup> "Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?"

<sup>35</sup> "Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?"

<sup>36</sup> Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place."

<sup>37</sup> "You are a king, then!" said Pilate.

Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

The story is filled with irony. Admittedly, it seems out of place when our thoughts are more closely aligned with Advent and Christmas than Good Friday and Easter. However, this scene from Jesus' trial presents a confrontation between two powers: Pilate thinks he has the power but in fact he has little if any power at all.

Jesus, on the other hand, knows he has the power; however, by outward appearance, he is utterly powerless. In the end, it is Jesus who truly knows where power comes from, and what it means, and how it should be used.

"For this I was born," Jesus says to Pilate, "and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Those who are empowered by God are not meant to use that power for their own interests. God empowers us that we might use it for a higher purpose.

Pilate begins the trial of Jesus as the judge, as the authority figure. He assumes that he has the power to either save Jesus or to have him crucified. In fact, Pilate doesn't even have that much power because as the story unfolds, the Jewish religious leaders box him in until he has no choice but to have Jesus crucified. When he finally reaches that decision, it was a decision reached out of political expediency and nothing more. In the end, Pilate did what the Jews demanded rather than what he knew to be right and just. In the end, Pilate was powerless, despite all the power he thought he possessed.

Pilate, in his powerlessness, was motivated by political expediency and resorted to domination, violence and exploitation, which are the usual weapons of this world for retaining power.

Jesus, on the other hand, wanted to talk about truth—an utterly foreign concept to an earthly ruler. But truth is always threatening to people like Pilate who have abused and misused their power.

In the end, Pilate sends Jesus to a Roman cross. Pilate becomes one who takes away life. Of course, we know that through his crucifixion, Jesus has the power to save Pilate, if only Pilate would accept that salvation. Jesus, in losing his life, becomes the Life-giver and he gives it abundantly.

Finally we come to Revelation chapter 1:

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, <sup>5</sup> and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, <sup>6</sup> and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

<sup>7</sup> “Look, he is coming with the clouds,” and “every eye will see him, even those who pierced him”; and all peoples on earth “will mourn because of him.”

So shall it be! Amen.

<sup>8</sup> “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”

The titles ascribed to God and to Jesus reinforce the nature of God's power. God is the One “who is and who was and who is to come.”

Jesus is:

- † The faithful witness
- † The firstborn from the dead
- † The ruler of the kings of the earth (including all the Pilates of the world)
- † The One who loves us
- † The One who frees us from our sins by his blood
- † The One who makes us to be a kingdom of priests serving our God
- † The One who is coming with the presence of God (for that is what the clouds symbolize)
- † The Alpha—the beginning and the first word—and the Omega—the last and final word. In John's Gospel, Jesus is described as the “Word of God.” Here in Revelation, that description goes one step further: he is every letter of every Word that is God. He is the Alpha
- † The one who is and who was and is to come.

On this Christ the King Sunday, we are called to submit ourselves to Christ and make him not just a *king* or *the King*, but *our King*. Admittedly, that is difficult for us because we are Americans. As a nation, we have rejected royal authority. We much prefer picking our own leaders and then voting them out of office when we get tired of them. Our call to crown Christ as our King is a call to submit to him wholly, completely and forever. But as we submit ourselves to Christ, we find that he still confers power on his people, just as he did David. It certainly is not for us to be king as David was, but it is for a similar purpose.

God conferred power upon David so that he might build up the kingdom of God as it was understood in that day. So God confers power upon us so that we might likewise build up the kingdom of God in our day, but with a far more global—a far more inclusive—understanding of what God's kingdom is all about.

Consider the parting words of Christ to his disciples—and to us:

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).