

“Real Power”
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Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29

We know all too well the mighty power of wind and water and fire. They can and sometimes do kill. The fierce winds and waters of hurricanes – equal opportunity destroyers – wipe out homes, businesses, schools, and lives. It takes years to recover. Closer to home, tornados touch down with no warning and can lift entire houses and barns off the ground and drop them miles away. A tornado will turn wood into splinters in seconds and drive pieces of straw into trees. That’s not a rural legend. I’ve seen it.

Too much rain, and flood waters wipe away or ruin whatever’s in their path. Too little, and life dies. In places like California, and throughout the American West, drought leads to raging fires that turn homes and forests into ash over vast areas in a short period of time. When wind and water and fire wreak havoc on people and places, it’s hard to grasp the scale of that power. Yet the same forces that take also give life.

Water makes up two-thirds of the human body, and without it, we can survive for mere days. We can last much longer without food, but without water, there would be no food: no gardens or apple trees or fish. Each fiber of every stitch that covers our bodies, whether it be cotton or wool or artificially made, requires water,

Likewise, with wind, have you ever wondered what would happen if it just stopped? What would the weather be like? In the long term, could we even keep breathing? And harnessing fire was one of the greatest discoveries in human history. It gives light in the darkness, warmth against the cold. Imagine no heat for your home or stove. Unless you walked,

fires inside your car brought you here. Even if you drive a fully electric car fueled by solar panels – and good for you if you do – without the sun’s flames, those wheels aren’t going to turn.

Yet these awesome natural forces, which inspire both fear and gratitude, are nothing compared to the power of God who created them all. The Bible tries to give us a clue about who God is and often uses images of wind and water and fire, things we know, so that we can catch a glimpse of someone ultimately beyond knowing. In Psalm 29, “The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare,” just as a strong wind would. “The Lord sits enthroned over the flood.” The message is plain. Treacherous seas and raging rivers are puny next to God. Howling winds and the inferno of the sun are puny next to God.

Some of this we don’t like. The idea that God can just speak and twist an oak tree like a fidget toy intimidates us, and that makes us uncomfortable, and a lot of us think that God’s not meant to make us uncomfortable. Some think God’s job is to make it all OK. And when He doesn’t, it causes some people to kick God to the curb, like a bad employee. But if God’s power doesn’t scare us, we are fools. Without the fear of God that’s the beginning of wisdom, we see a part of who God is – the merciful, forgiving, loving, generous God – but when we block out the All Mighty part of God, the part that scares us, how do the parts we like work?

A powerless God can’t help. A weak God can’t help. It takes a powerful God to free us from sin and death, to give us hope and joy. It takes a God whose power freaks us out sometimes to make the changes we need in our lives and in our world. Grace is no light thing. At times, it feels that way, when it lifts us up and gives us peace, but that’s the result of grace. God’s grace is a heavyweight that bursts on the scene and pushes stuff around and says, “No more.”

When we sing “Joy to the World” at Christmastime, “No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thrones infest the ground,” we voice the truth that God yanks stuff up like weeds in a field, shifting whole landscapes to suit His purpose. We praise a God who can say to deep waters, “You stay there. This is dry ground, and that’s how it going to be.” We praise a God who splits a sea so that people can escape slavery, but also wander in the wilderness for a while, where it’s very dry.

When we accept God for who He is, both the comfy parts and the parts that send a little shiver down our spines, we can then accept – and not a moment before – the truth the prophet Isaiah reveals that “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you . . . and the flame shall not consume you.”

If you’re getting burned by mean people or burned-out by work or life in general, God can fireproof you with His mighty grace. Selfish people who are out to hurt you, immature people who just don’t know any better, none of them can stand up to God. He may not snap His fingers and make it all better. I wish God would, and why he doesn’t, I don’t know. But I think part of it has to do with the fact that God loves us so much that He lets us work with Him, like a parent who lets a little child help cook dinner or help saw the plank in the workshop. God loves us and lets us work with Him and say, “No more of this!” And that builds us up.

“No more of this! I say yes to grace and yes to change and yes to the God who saves. I say yes to this and no to that, including those parts of me that may need to be consumed by holy fire, because they are so dry and dangerous and flammable – the anger, the hate, the resentment, the fantasies of vengeance and illusions of superiority.” We don’t need such nonsense unless we choose to go it alone without God’s help.

When we feel flooded by our obligations and obsessions, by the confusion and anxiety wrought by the chaos of life in this world, when we feel the water inching up to our nose, God is there. “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,” because, “I have called you by name, you are mine.”

“You are mine.” That’s the reality of grace summed up in a three-word sentence. “You are mine.” We belong. In world too full of empty detachment and loneliness, we belong. We belong to a God of power, whose Spirit whips us up and carries us aloft. We belong to a God of power, who makes us buoyant by grace and empowers us to breathe, to breathe by floating on choppy seas that try to drag us down. We belong to a God of power, against whom no power on Earth stands a chance; an All Mighty God, before whom the proud wither and the humble prosper.

Now, it doesn’t always seem that way. For some, it never feels that way. And I wouldn’t blame you one bit for thinking that those are some nice images and ideas: not drowning; not getting burned, and being healed when we are. “No more. I say yes. You are mine.” Those are encouraging words, but what of them? A lot of us have been following the Way of Jesus for a long time, and it seems as if there’ve been more blisters than blessings on the journey. Where’s God’s power in the world when cruelty seems foremost and the devil takes the hindmost and there doesn’t seem to be much space in between? Is it a matter of perspective? Do we just not see? Is it a matter of patience? How long shall we wait?

Those are good, honest questions – not unfaithful in the least. And my answer is, “I don’t know. I really don’t know.” That may come as a disappointment, because it’s not unfair to expect that your priest would have some kind of answer for the tough questions. But here’s my personal witness, and hopefully, it will help.

I know of no other way to live than to put my faith in Jesus. I've explored other options, and none of them worked. I have experienced great grace and mercy. Sometimes, it was more than anyone has a right to hope for. Sometimes, it didn't seem like enough, but I've decided that, spiritually, it's better to be hungry than to starve altogether. When it seems like the deal isn't paying off, I try to remember that belonging to God isn't about a payoff, and when I forget that, no good comes from it for me and for those I love.

I've come to believe, most of the time, that God's love is real and powerful and meaningful, despite all evidence to the contrary, and there's plenty of evidence out there. This isn't blind faith. It's a daily choice between saying yes or no, between saying no more or whatever, and sometimes the battle of choosing, of being responsible about being free, is fierce.

There are mysteries that none of us are privileged to know. A skeptic would say that's a very convenient way out. In reply, I would say, never trust someone who pretends to have all the answers. Amen.

