

MIGHTY GOD

ISAIAH 9:6-7

Power can be intoxicating. Ronald Levy, a first grader in Philadelphia, was told by his parents to come directly home from school. But he began to arrive late quite frequently – sometimes as late as 20 minutes. His mother asked him, “Ronald, you get out of school at the same time every day. Why can’t you get home at the same time?” “It depends on the cars, Mom,” Ronald responded. “What do cars have to do with it?” asked Mom. Ronald replied, “The safety patrol boy who takes us across the street makes us wait until some cars come along so he can stop them.” I can relate to that story, because I was a safety patrol back in the sixth grade. I well recall the feeling of raw power in being able to stop cars and usher fellow students safely across the street. In fact, one of the great disappointments in my young life was to achieve the rank of both sergeant and lieutenant in the school safety patrol, but never to be elected captain. I got close once, but ended up losing by one vote... to a girl! The safety patrol captain got to lead the whole school in the pledge of allegiance over the intercom system and, also, give the daily announcements. That was a real power position!

Power. Might. Strength. Authority. One of the most basic truths about God taught throughout the Bible is that He is omnipotent – all powerful. What does that mean? What difference does it make in your life or mine? Ultimately, both questions are answered best in the person of Jesus Christ – the One whose birth we celebrate at this wonderful time of the year. Isaiah, the great Old Testament prophet who lived some 800 years before Jesus was born, believed that God’s power would be ultimately revealed in the coming Messiah. He gives a tremendous prophecy about Him.

What Child is this? That’s the title of our message series this Advent season. Isaiah provides four very interesting answers to that question: This Child is Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace. Each name reveals a characteristic about Jesus that meets a need in your life. Do you need infallible direction and guidance in your life? Jesus is Wonderful Counselor. Do you need genuine love and security? He is Everlasting Father. Do you need peace of mind and peace of heart? He is Prince of Peace. But it’s that second name that I want you to think with me about today. Do you need a source of power, strength and energy that’s beyond what you have to offer? Well, then, take heart because Jesus is Mighty God. What can we say about this power? First of all, we can say today that God’s power is:

DISCERNED IN HIS DEEDS

Probably the most obvious encounter each of us has with God’s power and might is in His deeds. The Bible always points us to creation as a primary evidence of the awesome power of God. The Bible says, “For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine

nature....” (Romans 1:20 NLT) As you reflect on the grandeur of the universe, the incredible planet upon which we live, and even the incredible intricacy of the human body, you get filled up with awe and wonder. That’s the only appropriate response! I like how a man by the name of Jim Bishop expressed in a tongue-and-cheek, ridiculing sort of way how silly it is to believe all of this just happened.

He writes: “There is no God! All of the wonders around us are accidental. No almighty hand made a thousand billion stars. They made themselves. No power keeps them on their steady course. The earth spins itself to keep the oceans from falling off toward the sun. Infants teach themselves to cry when they are hungry or hurt. The earth gave itself day and night, titled itself so that we get seasons. Without the magnetic poles man would be unable to navigate the trackless oceans of water and air, but they ‘just grew there.’ How about the sugar thermostat in the pancreas? It maintains a level of sugar in the blood without which all of us would fall into a coma and die. The human heart will beat for 70 or 80 years without faltering. How does it get sufficient rest between beats? A kidney will filter poison from the blood, and leave the good things alone. How does it know one from the other? Who gave the human tongue flexibility to form words, and a brain to understand them, but denied it to all other animals? Who showed a womb how to take the love of two persons and keep splitting a tiny ovum until, in time, a baby would have the proper number of fingers, eyes, ears and hair in the right places, and come into the world when it is strong enough to sustain life? There is no God!”

In the Old Testament, the power of God is seen in numerous acts of deliverance, salvation and intervention particularly when it came to the people of Israel. Being brought out of Egypt? The power of God! Dividing the Red Sea and the Jordan River so that the people could walk across? The power of God! Feeding them with manna and quail in the desert and providing water out of solid rock? The power of God! No group of people witnessed more demonstrations of the spectacular, miraculous power of Almighty God than the Jewish people.

And it’s that same God who fights on your behalf and stands guard over you every moment of every day. If we had the time today, many of you could stand up here and tell stories of how God has intervened in your life. God’s might has saved some of you from certain death. God’s power has healed some of you of terrible illnesses. God’s strength has sustained many of you through times of great personal weakness and stress. This room is full of the evidence of God’s might demonstrated in a multitude of ways. His Name is Mighty God!

God’s power is discerned in His deeds. The greatest demonstration of God’s power is, ironically, the moment when He seemed so powerless. I’m talking about Jesus’ sacrifice at the cross followed by His rising from the dead. This is the deed above all deeds. This is greater than anything in creation... greater than the parting of the Red Sea... greater than someone being miraculously healed from cancer. That’s why we - along with other followers of Jesus -

celebrate the Lord's Supper so often just as we're going to do again today. Our hearts resonate with what Paul wrote in the New Testament, "For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes.... The message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction! But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God." (Romans 1:16, 1 Corinthians 1:18 NLT)

Only the power of God released at the cross and the empty tomb can separate you from the guilt of your sins as far as the east is from the west. Only the power of God released at the cross and the empty tomb can restore you to a relationship with God so that He now becomes your heavenly Father. Only the power of God released at the cross and the empty tomb can give your life today genuine spiritual energy and purpose. Only the power of God released at the cross and the empty tomb can give you the certainty of eternal life. In the cross and at the empty tomb, you see God's power fully revealed. It's there that you are appropriately lost in wonder, love and praise and can only exclaim, "What a Mighty God we serve!" His Name is Mighty God! Secondly, God's power is:

DEMONSTRATED IN OUR WEAKNESS

How can that be true? First of all, God grants you the Holy Spirit-empowered ability to share His good news of love and grace with others. In fact, the Bible makes it quite clear that we – weak, sinful, imperfect, flawed human beings – have been entrusted with the message of God's spiritual rescue effort for humanity. In fact, we are His primary tool to get the job done! What Jesus said to His first followers, He says to every follower of Jesus: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses...." (Acts 1:8 NLT) It never ceases to amaze me how that humble, uneducated, economically marginal, technologically ignorant group of believers in the first century managed to spread the good news of Jesus to the entire Mediterranean area in one generation without the benefit of TV satellites, e-mail, copy machines, computers or jet travel. How did they do it? The power of God!

Have you thought about someone who doesn't follow Jesus yet that you could invite to the choir concert next Sunday or the Christmas Eve service? Have you thought about someone you could serve through an act of kindness or generosity? Is there someone you need to share the message of the cross and the empty tomb with this week? It has nothing to do with how smart, how verbal or how gifted you are. It has everything to do with how willing you are. The moment you became a follower of Jesus, you were given the power to reach lost people with the love of Jesus. Call it God's sense of humor, but it's a fact, nonetheless. Jesus wants to use imperfect, sinful, forgiven people to reach other imperfect, sinful people who need forgiveness. His Name is Mighty God!

God's power is demonstrated in our weakness. How so? Secondly, your weakness can become the place where God's power is most clearly revealed. A

great example of this is the apostle Paul in the New Testament. You recall that he referred to something he called “a thorn in the flesh.” We’re not sure what that means. The most convincing explanation I’ve read suggests that Paul suffered from some kind of eye problem that made him either a bit repulsive to look at or that caused him very painful headaches. What it was is not important. What God said to Paul about it is very important. Paul asked God to remove this thorn in the flesh on several occasions. Do you know what God said to him? “My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.” (2 Corinthians 12:9 NLT) That forced Paul to have one of those paradigm shifts in his thinking. He says, “So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. That’s why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Corinthians 12:9-10 NLT)

Have you been out shopping for diamonds recently? Well, the next time you go, the jeweler may very well do something to display the cut, clarity and color of the diamond you’re interested in. Now, he doesn’t throw it into a pile of other diamonds. No, instead, he displays it against a black velvet backdrop or some other kind of relatively valueless thing, so that the beauty of the stone can be better seen. What Paul understood, you and I need to understand. When God wants to show something of His incredible, awesome power, He chooses to display it most often against the backdrop of imperfect, weak, flawed and troubled human beings like us. The secret of having God’s power flow through your life is not by denying your weaknesses or covering up your imperfections. Instead, it’s by making yourself available to God every day you draw a breath.

Does God have the power to heal you of any disease? Of course He does! Pray for healing! But every serious illness isn’t healed. Instead God can choose to reveal something of His power in your ability to deal with great pain and physical weakness. Other people can see instead your gratefulness, your contentment, your utter dependency on God. They can actually see something of God in you. Does God have the power to heal any broken relationship – a marriage headed for divorce, a parent-child conflict, a busted friendship? Of course He does! Pray for reconciliation! But every broken relationship isn’t fixed. Instead God can choose to reveal something of His power in the midst of your emotional devastation and wounded feelings. Other people can see your graciousness, your forgiveness, your joy in God. They can actually see something of God in you. Does God have the power to redeem any disappointment in life – the loss of loved one, chronic loneliness, or failure to achieve some treasured goal? Of course He does! He can choose to reveal something of His power in the midst of your grief and brokenness. Other people can see your godly perspective on life, your trust, your faith in God’s plan and purposes come what may. They can actually see something of God in you. For reasons known only to God, human weakness, loss and hurt is often the best backdrop for the display of God’s power. When the Holy Spirit invades your spirit, your weakness gets covered

with God's power. By His grace, you are able to do the undoable, face the "unfaceable" and bear the unbearable. His Name is Mighty God!

God's power is demonstrated in our weakness. How so? Thirdly, God gives us the power to change and to be transformed. The Bible says, "By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life..." (2 Peter 1:3 NLT) Sadly, too many times the way we live our lives suggests that we believe in a nice, safe God who is powerless to transform our lives. We need to get rid of little thinking and small expectations about the God we serve.

Mighty God has the power to deliver you from an addiction to drugs, alcohol or pornography. Mighty God has the power to deliver you from deep resentment against someone who hurt you in the past. Mighty God has the power to enable you to forgive what is unforgivable. Mighty God has the power to help you put an end to a personal relationship that is out of His will. Mighty God has the power to deliver you from both a homosexual orientation and lifestyle. Mighty God has the power to deliver you from hating homosexual people. Mighty God has the power to heal your broken marriage or end a conflict between you and your child. Mighty God has the power to deliver you from hating people of other races. Mighty God has the power to deliver you from attitudes and behavior that result in ongoing financial disaster and generational poverty. Mighty God has the power to rescue you from despising poor people. Mighty God has the power to save you from an explosive temper or controlling, manipulative behavior. His Name is Mighty God, is it not?! Here's a final thought today. God's power is:

DEFINED BY HIS LOVE

Why doesn't God use His power in ways that we think He should? Nobody has more power than God. Why, then, does He allow 180 people to get killed by terrorists in Mumbai, India, allow countless children to die of starvation and disease in Africa or permit your loved one to die of some terrible disease? God could heal everyone and fix everything. The fact that God doesn't come down and set everything right leads some people either to reject His existence outright or to redefine Him as less than mighty God. Rabbi R.L Rubenstein, a leading Jewish theologian, lived through the Holocaust. People prayed. People cried out to God. People begged Him to use His power to stop the methodical murder of 6 million Jews in Nazi concentration camps. God, seemingly, did nothing. Rabbi Rubenstein gave up his belief in God. Another Jewish rabbi, Harold Kushner, wrote a best seller some years ago now entitled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. His son was a victim of progeria – a disease that causes rapid aging. Rabbi Kushner watched helplessly as his dear son grew old and died before the age of 12. He concluded that God wanted to help but that He didn't have the power to stop his son's suffering. In other words, God is loving but He isn't all powerful. He isn't Mighty God.

I'm not able to answer all the questions or resolve all the issues today even to my own satisfaction. But let me suggest this thought. In Jesus, God has chosen to approach us and to reveal Himself to us as the God of love more than the God of raw, spectacular power. The Christmas story itself points us in that direction. How did God choose to enter this world? He came as a vulnerable, fragile baby. Mighty God was incarnated as a powerless infant. In His ministry, Jesus consistently chose the pathway of love over the pathway of power. You may recall that Satan tempted Jesus at this very point: "Change those stones into bread... jump off the Temple roof and float down to the ground... dazzle people with Your power." Jesus refused to attract people to Himself by random demonstrations of awesome, supernatural power.

Of course, God can do the miraculous and the supernatural! But He prefers to draw us to Himself through the power of His love not the demonstration of His power. Instead of "wowing" us into submission by acts of awesome power, He reveals Himself as the God who is willing to sacrifice Himself for us in acts of mighty love. Yes, God created the universe with all of its mind-boggling wonders! But what draws us to Him is that image of a defenseless baby wriggling around in an animal's feeding trough – sent there for us. And beyond that manger scene, we're drawn to that greater vision of a man nailed through His feet and hands to a piece of wood – a ring of thorns pressed down on His scalp and an open wound in His side – dying there for us. It's in Jesus – Mighty God incarnate – that we see God's version of power as well as God's kind of love. God's power is always defined by His love. His Name is Mighty God!

In his book *Doubting*, author Alister McGrath shares a story about his aunt who died some time ago, having lived to be 80 or so. She had never married. During the course of clearing out her possessions, the family came across a battered old photograph of a young man. McGrath's aunt had, it turned out, fallen hopelessly in love as a young girl. It had ended tragically. She never loved anyone else and kept a photograph of the man she had loved for the remainder of her life. Why? Partly to remind herself that she had once been loved by someone. As she had grown old, she knew that she would have difficulty believing that, at one point in her life, she really had meant something to someone—that someone had once cared for her and regarded her as his everything. It could all have seemed a dream, an illusion, something she had invented in her old age to console her in her declining year. The photograph underlined just the opposite. It reminded her that it had not been invented; she really loved someone once and was loved in return. The photograph reminded her that she had been valued.

The communion bread and cup are like that photograph. They reassure you that something that seems too good to be true—something that you might even suspect was invented—really did happen. They remind us that Christmas and Easter are demonstrations of both God's power and God's very personal love for you and me. What Child is this? His Name is Mighty God!