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# The Last Sunday of Pentecost

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**Ephesians 1:15-23**





In our epistle this morning from Ephesians, four times in the span of two sentences, Paul writes the word “power”: the “greatness of God’s power,” the “working of God’s great power,” God putting this “power to work in Christ,” and Christ seated in heaven, “far above” all earthly “power.” In case it wasn’t clear the first time, Paul reiterates again and again that God is powerful. “Well of course God is powerful,” you might say, “we’re talking about God after all. Power is one of God’s main traits. If anything is true of God, it’s that God is powerful.”

We might readily associate God with power in an abstract way, like the correct answer on a catechism test: “Is God powerful?” the question reads. “Yes, God is very powerful,” we know the right answer to be. While we might acknowledge at this theoretical, cognitive level that God is powerful, do we really know the power of God? Have we personally experienced the awesome authority of Almighty God, the kind of encounter with the sheer holy power of the Divine, before which we can respond only with awestruck silence, wonder, and holy fear? Do we even want that kind of God, or does an all-powerful, High King of Heaven, feel a little too uncomfortable, distant, or even threatening?

I feel some concern at times that this dimension of God is sorely lacking in our 21st-century Western Christian mindset, in the “Jesus is my buddy” theology prevalent in American Christian culture. Now, admittedly, maybe we find “Jesus is my buddy” theology more so in certain evangelical strains of Christianity than in the Episcopal Church. But even here we are not immune from a theology in which awestruck wonder at God’s power is fairly scarce. If it’s not “Jesus is my buddy,” then perhaps the theology we gravitate towards is the “Good Shepherd Jesus” or “always smiling Jesus” or the “social justice Jesus” or the “enlightened Jesus” committed to the spread of progress and the uplift of humanity across the globe. My point is not that any of these visions—and versions—of Jesus are necessarily wrong, but that they are incomplete. Because, if our theology is to be a truly Christian theology, then alongside the profoundly compassionate Jesus must also stand Almighty God whose otherworldly power takes our breath away.

Put differently, I think we have little trouble believing in and celebrating the loving, smiling, always charitable Jesus: Jesus, friend of children and sinners. But our awareness and appreciation of the indescribable, silence-inducing power of

Almighty God is significantly underdeveloped. There are multiple reasons why this is the case, which I don't want to belabor right now. But instead I just want to stress that our general lack of appreciation of God's power actually costs us dearly. Because, for one thing, not really being cognizant of, let alone awestruck by, divine power leaves us poorly equipped to seek that power each and every day, limiting our connection to—and ability to be transformed by—the fundamental force behind all that is good in the universe. Instead of opening ourselves to that power, we (myself included) typically try to run our lives as if we are basically self-sufficient, more or less competent in our strength and wisdom to direct our affairs and pursue our goals.

In this dominant way of living, God lurks somewhere in the background, perhaps behind the curtain of our lives as we act out our lives—the star celebrities in our respective life stories—on the stage of existence. God is certainly there; God after all created the set and, to our minds, keeps the lights on and the theater in good enough condition. But in this dominant view, God is not really the one running the show—we are—and so while God is certainly powerful in theory, that power doesn't really appear much in the actual story line that we are each acting out.

But what if it did? How might our life stories be different if we were more closely in touch with superhuman power? With the loving authority that created the stars and the snails and the seas with just a word? What are we missing by keeping God and God's power offstage, by thinking and acting as if the spotlight were made for us, rather than inviting God to come out of the shadows and to let God's power take centerstage in the stories of our lives?

I sometimes think that more time in church should be devoted to telling stories, testimonies, of the difference it makes in our personal lives to invite God in, to give God control, to ask God—and God's power—to have the spotlight. So, in the rest of my sermon this morning, I want to share just one personal anecdote about what can happen when we invite the power of God to flow free. What can happen when we let God out of the box we place around God, out of the narrow roles we permit God to have, and instead, let God truly be God, as we call out to God, inviting God's power to work in miraculous ways:

This story begins in the winter of 2005. Back in my days as an evangelical missionary in Asia, I was travelling with some

missionary friends in India. On a certain Sunday morning, in the northern Indian city of Varanasi, we decided to attend the morning service at a local church down the street from our hotel. After the three-hour service (which was entirely in Hindi), my friends and I, along with the rest of the congregation, stood up to leave. Just then three men caught my eye as they lurched through the church's rear door. Unable to control their bodies, the men were clearly suffering significant distress: their limbs flailing wildly around, their bodies hurtling across the back of the sanctuary, these individuals were physically out-of-control. Taking in the scene before me, I immediately knew in my gut—a kind of undeniable, heart-level conviction—that the men's fundamental problem was not simply a physical one, but rather was essentially spiritual in nature: that their wild gyrations stemmed, in other words, from being possessed by a hostile spirit. As I looked on, one of the men staggered toward the altar rail at the front of the church and knelt down with his back towards the altar. I walked over to the twisting man, knelt beside him parallel to the altar rail, and then, quite automatically, my rudimentary religious training (from an evangelical Christian childhood) kicked in: I extended my right palm towards the man and began whispering over and over again, "in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, come out." In that moment I seemed to have entered a kind of a time-warp, for I do not know if I knelt and whispered for three minutes or thirty, but eventually, after some vague period of time, a sudden change occurred: Quite abruptly, the gyrating man was physically hurled forward, simultaneously somersaulting as if he had suddenly suffered a violent sledgehammer-blow to his back, while at the same time being lifted off his knees. Sailing about ten feet away, he landed firmly on his back with his arms splayed out and his eyes tightly closed. Bewildered and worried that the man was injured, I walked over to where he had landed and peered down at him. For some moments, he lay deathly still, apparently unconscious, until after several seconds, he began slowly to blink and then open his eyes. He then calmly raised himself into a sitting posture, legs stretched out straight before him. With his limbs back under his control, the man then slowly rose to his feet, shook my hand, and, smiling, walked out of the church. I was left speechless and dumbfounded at what had just occurred.

While events like this one have convinced me about the accessibility of divine power coursing under the surface of our

lives, I acknowledge that it's entirely possible to interpret such events in non-miraculous ways, to derive explanations that don't need the divine, or even to have buds of faith drowned out by that skeptical voice in our heads that demands more and more ironclad proof before it will believe.

But on top of this miracle story, you can pile a million more, and at some point, in light of the sheer volume of otherworldly events, it takes a far greater leap of faith to believe that all such miracles are coincidences than to simply acknowledge the presence of an Almighty God of breathtaking power.

However, it is also simply true that for every miraculous anecdote, one can also cite a prayer that apparently has gone unanswered or an opportunity for a miracle that God inexplicably seems to have ignored. Why does God act with miraculous power in some situations but not others? Wouldn't a loving God help literally everyone who needs it? These are serious objections and legitimate challenges to faith. But at the same time, part of faith in this Almighty God is the humble admission that God's ways are not our ways; God's wisdom not our wisdom. Chroniclers of miracle stories, like Dr. Craig Keener, author of *Miracles Today: The Supernatural Work of God in the Modern World*, admit plainly that miracles are the exception rather than the rule: generally, our lives stay firmly within the laws of science: colliding vehicles generally don't spring apart, mortal illness typically leads to death not life. But the very fact that miracles occur at all strongly suggests that this world in which we go about our daily lives is far more enchanted, far more infused by divine, mysterious power than we typically recognize. In truth, God works according to a mysterious logic that we cannot fully comprehend, and while that logic at times can be understandably frustrating—especially when we want a miracle which fails to materialize—the fact of the matter is that miracles continue to occur. Meditating on that fact alone can expand our faith, deepen our hope, and energize our prayers.

So where do we go from here? We live in such a skeptical environment towards the spiritual world, and specifically towards the idea of a loving and Almighty God, that we need to be very intentional in resisting our culture's narrowing of our sense of what's possible, resisting the pressure of skepticism by taking deliberate steps to expand our view of God's indescribable power. A few suggestions for doing this:

1. Read books on miracles, like *Miracles Today* by Dr. Craig Keener. Or more broadly, books that expand your soul's view of reality beyond the strictly scientific. Books like *Encountering Mystery* by Princeton Prof. Dale Allison or *After*—a fascinating account of near-death and afterlife experiences—written by Dr. Bruce Greyson, professor at the University of Virginia medical school. These are not naïve rejections of science but instead serious scholarly analyses of realities—encounters with divine power—which exceed the language science currently possesses to explain them.

2. Build into your prayers a request that God would help your spiritual eyes to be more open, more attentive and attuned to God's presence and activity in the midst of your daily life. Ask God for spiritual vision.

3. Pray boldly: pray big prayers for specific, godly goals—healing of illness, healing of relationships, healing of political divisions, just to name three—and make these requests with childlike faith in our all-powerful God. And then keep praying. Give your soul the chance to build its spiritual muscles by persisting in prayer and enduring in faith, even if it takes a very long time to see any visible results.

In taking these steps, I pray that we each may come to see where our personal conceptions of God are too small, too limited; I pray that we may recognize areas in our lives where we have pushed God offstage rather than surrendering the limelight to God's miraculous power; and finally I pray that we may perceive opportunities to pray boldly in faith, inviting and trusting God's power to do the seemingly impossible. As we do so, may our faith in our Almighty God grow and expand as we are humbled and silenced into breathtaking awe by, as Paul says, "the immeasurable greatness of God's power for us who believe." Amen.

