

Power Struggle

A Sermon Preached by Joan H. Watson
Covenant Presbyterian Church; Charlotte, North Carolina
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Morning Lesson: I Kings 1 (selected verses)

To talk about David – shepherd boy, giant slayer, charismatic king – is to talk about power: used power and misused power, power that resulted in life and death, unity and division, blessing and curse in his own life and in the lives of those around him. Power and power struggles are intricate parts of the story of this great man of God – and it is quite a story – a story that resonates, in part, with our lives, as well.

The David stories are told in an expansive portion of scripture. They are at the same time earthly and godly stories, observes writer Eugene Peterson. For all the human reporting of the thoughts and words and actions of a single man, it is still really a story about God and what God was doing in and through this bigger than life figure, Israel's king David. "We are never more alive," Peterson said than when we are dealing with God. And David was alive, dealing regularly with God or, more aptly put, God was dealing regularly with David. "Every event in his life was a confrontation with God." Peterson noted. His will vs God's will; a power struggle on some days, a love story on others. His story is in some ways our story. For it seems that in the world in which we live, and in the shadowy world of our own hearts, the use and misuse of power are always at play. And the question arises: Whose will, in the end, will be done?

Power struggles are not just the stuff of Old Testament patriarchs, prophets, and kings, or New Testament scribes, Pharisees, Apostles and the Son of God. How many great leaders, public figures, private citizens, families have been raised up or brought down by chronic or crisis events dealing with power?

Scripture tells us in instruction and through example that the use of power is a spiritual issue, because power is a divine gift and a good gift. But it is one that can easily fall victim to sin in the lives of sinful people.

Writer, pastor, and spiritual guide Richard Foster, in his rather earthy book **Money, Sex and Power**, says this:

Nothing touches us more profoundly for good or for ill than power (it) can destroy or create ... this is true whether we look through the macrocosm of human history or the microcosm of our own personal histories.

And the story of David is one of the great stories of God's activity in the life of man both blessed and flawed, a story that reaches through history with words of wisdom and words warning for us all.

Today, as we continue our readings and reflections on David's life, we find him in a very different place than we found him in our readings of the last two Sundays. Last week, we saw an inspired and inspiring David with a God-shaped imagination freeing the armies of Israel from an ominous oppressor by the name of Goliath. The week before, we met a young, handsome, skillful David, an unlikely candidate to be king in human eyes, but the just-right person in God's eyes, in the eyes of God who sees the heart. David was crowned Israel's second king under God's guidance by the prophet Samuel. But, you remember, it all happened in secret because of a power struggle with Saul.

And now today we see yet another David, an aged man, weakened and near death. We also see people scrambling around him: trying both to revive him and to take his place and claim his power.

Listen now from I Kings, chapter one. Listen to the word of God.

King David was old and advanced in years; and although they covered him with clothes, he could not get warm. So his servants said to him, "Let a young virgin be sought for my lord the king, and let her wait on the king, and be his attendant; let her lie in your bosom, so that my lord the king may be warm." So they searched for a beautiful girl throughout all the territory of Israel, and found Abishag the Shunammite, and brought her to the king. The girl was very beautiful. She became the king's attendant and served him, but the king did not know her sexually. Now Adonijah son of Haggith exalted himself, saying, "I will be king;" he prepared for himself chariots and horsemen, and fifty men to run before him. His father had never at any time displeased him by asking, "Why have you done thus and so?" He was also a very handsome man, and he was born next after Absalom.

The story goes on (now in paraphrase). Adonijah, it seems, checked out his plans to become king with one priest, but not with all of them, and decidedly not with the prophet Nathan who had a very different idea about who should have the job. On Adonijah's insiders list we find the royal officials of Judah: Joab, the commander of the army, and all the king's sons - except for Solomon. On the outsiders', list joining the prophet Nathan, several priests, and Solomon, were the king's warriors and Solomon's mother, Bathsheba.

Well, seeing this power play right before his eyes, Nathan decided to take matters into his own hands. He went to see Bathsheba, observing out loud that, in case she hadn't noticed, Adonijah had made himself king, leaving her and her son Solomon out of the picture. That would mean certain trouble, serious trouble for both of them. Furthermore, he said, David, who is still alive, doesn't have a clue or seem to care.

Nathan offered a plan for changing the tide of events, but he would need Bathsheba's help. He told her to go see David and remind him of something he had said years ago (except that he may never have said it) - that Solomon, not Adonijah, would be his successor. To seal the deal, Nathan would pay a visit after hers to verify that such a declaration had indeed been made.

So - should the ill king have trouble remembering what he may never have said, or should he be wary of one mother vying for her own son's superiority over another mother's son, David would certainly believe Nathan. After all, Nathan was the prophet who had confronted him years ago about this illicit relationship with Bathsheba; he was the prophet who had brought him to his knees and back to his God. Surely such a prophet would be on the up and up about the succession of Israel's kings.

Bathsheba did as she was told, and did so effectively. Nathan followed close behind, confirming every word. And King David responded. These are his words:

As the Lord lives, who has saved my life from every adversity, as I swore to you by the Lord, the God of Israel, "Your son Solomon shall succeed me as king, and he shall sit on my throne in my place," so will I do this day. Then Bathsheba bowed with her face to the ground, and showed her obedience to the king, and said, "May my lord King David live forever!"

Now rousing for a moment from his passive, impotent state, David began to look like the David of old. He took decisive action and commanded what was to happen in order to crown Solomon.

Word of this power shift reached Adonijah, to his horror and to the horror of those around him already celebrating. Adonijah now feared for his life. He grabbed the horns at the altar (as a means of begging for mercy) and Solomon - well, scripture reports that Solomon answered the plea for mercy in a rather wily way, and for the time being, Adonijah was spared.

As chapter one of I Kings ends, Solomon, who has been a silent, absent player throughout, is now the one with the power.

As I Kings opens, the setting is one of intrigue in the face of a nation's uncertainty. It centers around a man who is old, ill, and nearing death, but who once was full of life; a figure like none other in Israel's history. It appears that David will not die an heroic death to match his heroic life, clothed in a warrior's armor and energy marching into glory. Instead, his death will be the kind that ekes away vibrancy and personality, leaving only shadowy remembrance of one who is no more.

But the Bible doesn't say all this; it simply says: David was cold – so cold, that nothing in life could warm him. In a last ditch effort, his servants had a bright idea. Perhaps a beautiful, young girl could give him the warmth that clothes and blankets couldn't. She could even do more; yes, perhaps she could restore his power and presence to a world where he had once been bigger than life.

Meanwhile, David's oldest surviving son, Adonijah, decides that his father is as good as dead and he should now be king, the rightful heir assuming the throne. Only there was a problem. Biblical scholar Gene Rice noted that the constitutional procedure for determining succession had not been established. David had become king on the authority of the prophet Samuel and had displaced Israel's first king, Saul. The question remained: Were prophets to determine kings? Or was a king to be determined by succession to the throne in order of birth? Adonijah assumed that the kingship was his by right of birth, and David didn't do anything to settle the question. (Gene Rice)

Now power was up for grabs, and in its wake was developing something of a national crisis. You see, the king was often regarded as the link between the divine and human and was seen as the channel of blessing and welfare for his people. So David's vitality was essential for his rule – no vitality, no king, no blessing. If David wasn't up to the task, dead or alive – it didn't matter; Israel needed another king. Adonijah was willing and available. But the prophet Nathan had a different plan. His plan was for a co-regency with David and Solomon reigning together. That would be enough to secure stability. (Richard Nelson: Interpretation).

Power struggles – of every sort – were not new in David's life, nor in his family. Neither was tragedy, which often walks hand in hand with such struggles. His oldest son had raped his own half sister and then was killed in revenge by her full brother, Absalom. The second son apparently died in childhood. Impatient for power, David's third son, Absalom, Tamar's avenger, attempted to seize the throne by force and led the nation into civil war, a war in which he himself was killed. This left Adonijah next in line.

Adonijah planned well. He decided to look and act the part of the king. With chariots and military escort he sought the backing of priests (at least some of them) and of the military commander, as well as popular and familial support. He even organized a ceremonial meal where people would make their pledges to him. (Rice)

Whether Adonijah was wrong in seeking the throne is debatable, some scholars say. His critics point to a kind of arrogance of assumption. But, after all, he was the oldest son. It was unclear whether this move on his part was acceptable or treasonous.

Furthermore, as we see in chapter one, being the eldest living son did not mean that he was the one God had in mind to be David's successor. Logic, it seems, doesn't trump divine will. So in this mix we have no clear system in place for choosing leadership; a dysfunctional leader—for understandable reasons; frightened people afraid that without a good leader God might forget them or not bless them; ambitious people ready and willing to do the job their way for their glory. We have human will and God's will and in the middle, we have a power struggle.

Well, plans or not on the part of Adonijah, the prophet Nathan decides to intervene and that intervention is the story we read in I Kings, chapter one. He is effective, and so, in quick course, Adonijah riding on assumed power is now dethroned – leaving him with no power and in mortal danger. And silent Solomon becomes the heir apparent, chosen by God.

This is the stuff of Russian novels, gothic Southern tales, 21st century politics, the politics of nation, state, city, business, church, home, heart. Who's got the power, who wants it, how to get it, how to use it; and what price to pay for it – human struggles in an economy of winners and losers, haunted by a single question: Where is God in all of this? Where is God in this scramble for place and purpose in a divinely created and ordered universe? Where is God – God who gives to people the great gift of power to be used for good, not ill; to be used for the larger benefit of others and not just personal benefit? Where is God who defines power so very differently than we do? The Bible tells us the story of the tumultuous life of David and of other patriarchs and prophets, but it also speaks an unmistakable language that says something else, that offers another way as it speaks of vulnerability not prowess; of humility not arrogance; of service that is sacrificial and not the right to rule unchecked, unquestioned. the apostle Paul said that power is made perfect in weakness, for to be weak – in Christ – is to be strong. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn the other; walk the second mile; pray for those who persecute you, love your enemies, the words of Jesus in the Gospel according to Matthew. Instructions and examples in their lives of this truth, that power is indeed still present, still a gift of God, but used very differently for God's purposes. The self-emptying of Christ who, though he was God, humbled himself even to the cross – for us.

So in the face of the human struggle for power, God is there. The Bible tells us so. And in the midst of this world's self-proclaimed winners and losers, God is there, perhaps keeping score differently. Scripture reminds us that all human decisions are still up for divine review. That is the message of this story.

So what do we hear and see this morning? Do we see ourselves in the Biblical story? Are there power struggles going on in our lives now that need a word from God? Do we feel the struggles, the competition, in this “winner take all” world? Do we feel it with those we love, in our homes, in our families? Do we feel the struggle in our places of work or play? Have we been tempted to call it something else, like “healthy competition,” the “survival of the fittest,” the “brightest and best prevail.” Are our own hearts divided?

The story of David is actually good news for us, not just because he gives us something to aspire to in charisma, skill, royalty or devotion, but because though deeply flawed, David is the conduit through whom God works divine plans, redemptive power. God loves David and David loves God. This, indeed, is good news, but it is not always painless news, for power struggles complicated, confused and burdened his life with much grief and deep strife, as they do for ours.

But such need not be the case, for lives need not be wrecked or ruined in God's economy of grace. The Bible tells us that, as well, in an economy where divine will is done on earth as in heaven, and God is Lord and King. Thanks to David, we see how God blesses and guides and uses for the kingdom's sake a person's gifts. Thanks to David, we see what happens when power shifts in heart, in home, in country. Let us listen to the story, the whole story. And may the truth that sets us free be told and God, may God who redeems the worst, and wants for us the best, be glorified.

Amen.

References

Richard Foster, **Money, Sex and Power**

Richard Nelson, **First and Second Kings, Interpretation Bible Commentary**

Eugene Peterson, **Leap over the Wall**

Gene Rice, **I Kings, New International Commentary**