
How Does It Preach? “Power” as an Interpretive Tool

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Power as a hermeneutic

It’s no surprise that kings, pharaohs, and caesars don’t fare very well in the Bible. Simply put, they represent empire, which is the most concentrated expression of power organized against not only the Creator but against the well being of creation. Empire is idolatry on a high order.

The Bible provides a powerful critique of the coercive power that is embodied in empire, and this critique is an invaluable tool for process-minded preachers. Quite simply, the interpretive tool of “power” is a key that unlocks the lectionary, giving the preacher biblically based opportunities every Sunday to teach process themes about the nature of God (persuasive love) and God’s will for the well-being of creation (“to live, to live well, to live better”).¹

The hermeneutic applied: I Samuel

With “power” as a hermeneutic, the Bible yields a rich harvest of process-imbued sermons. For example, God, through the prophet Samuel, warns against coercive power concentrated in a king by describing the ways of a king in 1 Samuel 8:10-18. The operative word in this text is

“take.” The king will take your sons and daughters, your land, your wealth; the king will take, take, take, to the point where the people will cry out in despair. The sermon message is that coercive power works its way into our lives as forms of injustice, domination, oppression, and death. Because of the kind of power empire embodies, it does not generate peace, health, well-being, or life.

“Power” is a prime biblical category used to interpret the continuing human struggle for well-being, how well-being is frustrated, and how God is involved in the world as the true source of well-being. It’s obvious that the Bible is against empire and the kind of coercive power it represents. But what kind of power does God have? Is divine power the same as that embodied in a king, only to a perfect degree, or is it something else altogether? Is the Creator God a benevolent Manipulator? The Bible ultimately sees the divine power as creatively transforming. But what kind of power is that?

Revelation 5

There is a dramatic scene in Revelation 5 where the vision of the writer takes him to the heavenly throne room. The throne

is surrounded by various heavenly beings and the focus of the scene is on the one who sits on the throne. There is a sealed scroll and the question arises,

‘Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?’
And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look at it, and I wept much that no one was found worthy to look into it. Then one of the elders said to me, ‘Weep not; lo, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.’

The question is, who has the power to open the scroll and, with that kind of power, what would it mean to win? Everyone is expecting the power of a king in the form of a Lion. Instead, a slain Lamb appears next to the throne. When the Lamb took the scroll from the One on the throne, those around the throne bowed down and sang a new song, all of heaven eventually exclaiming, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” This is one of the great reversal stories in the Bible.

The sermon message is this: Everyone is expecting one kind of power (Lion) but gets another (Slain Lamb). Divine power is shockingly redefined in this text. If the Lion represents kingly, coercive power, what would the Slain Lamb represent? Certainly not the power of king or emperor, but something more like suffering love. Divine power is not a power that disposes from on high. Rather, it is a power that enters into and endures involvement in life.

John 2

There is a story in the Gospel of John where Jesus turns water into wine. It's the first story in that Gospel and seems relatively quiet, even small, compared to stories later on in the narrative. Its subtlety, however, is beguiling, because this story holds the key to the nature of divine power that gets worked out in the rest of the narrative. The scene is a common event, a wedding party. The host runs out of wine, and Jesus' mother informs him of the situation, implying that he do something about it—what, we don't know. Jesus instructs the servants to fill jars with water and, when they do, he instructs them to draw some out of the jars and take the sample to the steward. They do so and the steward, unaware that the water had been changed to wine, compliments the bridegroom for the fine wine. The wedding goes on and so does the rest of the narrative. The only people aware that water has been changed into wine are Jesus, the servants, and

the reader. No one else is aware, and the party continues without a hitch.

What happened? Well, we're not quite sure. How did the water get transformed into wine? Well, we don't know. The heart of the story involves a very quiet transformation. Jesus allowed, caused, triggered, performed, induced (we're not sure how to characterize his action) a transformation. And no one was required to be aware of it, much

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less understand it, in order to enjoy it. The unnoticed transformation occurred and life went on.

The reader goes on to subsequent stories in the narrative in the Gospel of John and notices that the same creative transformation occurs in other scenes, each transformation getting more dramatic as the story goes on until, by the time the resurrection of Jesus occurs, the reader knows that the same principle of creative transformation as happened in the water-to-wine story has wound its way through the entire narrative. What weird transaction changed the water to wine? What happened when the

blind man gained his sight? What happened when the sick were healed? What happened when Jesus was raised from the dead? We don't know. But the fact remains—and the sermon message is this—that it happens. Transformation happens in the narrative and in our lives. What happens when egg meets sperm in the womb? What happens when life springs from the earth in Spring? That same strange power is at the very center of our lives, quietly working to transform all of our experiences of death into new life. It is a creating, transforming power, and the Bible says that this kind of power is divine.

Story after story could be piled up as examples of various expressions of coercive power pitted against divine power, all making the same point: God's power is not like that of a king or a caesar or a pharaoh or a president, but is a whole different category of power. Process theology's understanding of coercive and persuasive power provides an effective and helpful way of interpreting the issues of power in the Bible. But it does more: it provides a process hermeneutic—an interpretive key—that can be applied to lectionary texts from one Sunday to the next, resulting in sermons that are both faithful to the Bible *and* to the process understanding of God's transformative work in the world.

¹ Alfred North Whitehead, *The Function of Reason* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958) 8.