

“The Mighty God”

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Isaiah 9:2-6

- The people who walked in darkness
 have seen a great light;
 those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
 on them light has shined.
- 3 You have multiplied the nation,
 you have increased its joy;
 they rejoice before you
 as with joy at the harvest,
 as people exult when dividing plunder.
- 4 For the yoke of their burden,
 and the bar across their shoulders,
 the rod of their oppressor,
 you have broken as on the day of Midian.
- 5 For all the boots of the tramping warriors
 and all the garments rolled in blood
 shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
- 6 For a child has been born for us,
 a son given to us;
 authority rests upon his shoulders;
 and he is named
 Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

THE MIGHTY GOD

Today we consider the second of Isaiah’s names for the Messiah, the
 Mighty God.

In Isaiah’s day the people thought that the power of God resided with the
 king.

The king was sort of like a conduit for the holy.

This was especially true when it came to his role as commander and chief.

The power of God was demonstrated by success on the battlefield.

That's why in earlier days the Ark of Covenant would precede God's people into battle.

You'll remember that the Ark was essentially a throne for the invisible God of the Hebrew people.

And so when the Ark preceded the people into battle, it was like the invisible God was on his throne fighting for His people and leading them into battle.

This gave God's people courage.

How can you lose if God is on your side? Right?

THE EXODUS

There are many stories in the Hebrew Bible that testify to this Mighty God who chooses a human being to lead His people. But, of course, the most important example is the story of Moses and the Exodus from Egypt.

Moses is chosen by the Holy One, the Great I Am, to lead his people out of slavery in the land of Egypt. Moses did not want this job.

But, Moses' excuses were no match for the call of God.

Moses became the reluctant mouthpiece of God. And through the Exodus God's people learned the awesome nature of the God who saved them.

Egypt was the most powerful nation in the ancient world. But, Egypt was no match for the power of God.

The story of the Exodus is always in the background when we talk about the Mighty God.

Every Sabbath was an opportunity to reflect up the might and power of this Holy God.

Each year at Passover God's people remembered in great detail the One who led them out of Egypt with "a mighty hand and an outstretched arm".

LORD OF LORDS

The Name of this Mighty God was too holy to even be spoken.

Today many Jews write God with a space mark in place of the “o” in order to indicate the holy nature of God’s name.

So the Mighty God was not just another “god” among others. He was known as the God of gods and the Lord of lords.

The Lord guided the broad sweep of history. This Mighty God was the power behind the throne.

The One who was really in charge was not the king. The One who was really in charge was the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the Mighty God.

The power of this Mighty God is demonstrated not only by His intervention in the history of His people but also by His providential care of nature.

For example, the Psalmist wrote, “The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord over mighty waters ...” (Psalm 29:3)

And also, “The Mighty One, God the Lord, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting.”

A Psalm that many of us think about when contemplating the wonders of creation goes,
“The heavens are telling the glory of God...”

A NEW NAME FOR THE MESSIAH

It seems to me that when Isaiah used this title, he was elevating the role of the Messiah in a way that had not been done before.

Yes, the King that comes may be “like” a Son of God. That was a common way of talking about a new king.

But, when Isaiah said that the Messiah would be the Mighty God, that was something new.

Remember this people thought God was so holy that they would not even say His name.

But, now a child would be born, a son would be given who would not only be a Spirit empowered leader.

He would be the Mighty God.
God would be with them in the flesh.
That was truly different.

More than any other name for the Messiah, this name prepares the way of the Lord.

This Messiah would be unlike any other.
He would be called the Mighty God.

And this is why the miracles of Jesus are so important.

They are signs that this prophecy is fulfilled in Jesus.
The miracles demonstrate that Jesus was different from all the other prophets and kings that had come before him.

Yes, Jesus was the Messiah, but He was more than a Messiah.

God was in Christ.
He was the Mighty God present in the flesh.
The kingdoms of this world had been interrupted by the Kingdom of God come to earth in the ministry of Jesus.

THE HOLY ONE OF GOD

This is symbolized in Mark's gospel when Jesus encounters a man with an "unclean spirit". (Mark 1:21-28) The unclean spirit immediately recognizes Jesus and the threat he poses.

So the spirit shouts out,
"What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?
Have you come to destroy us?"

I know who you are, the Holy One of God."

In the gospel of Mark the identity of Jesus is something of a mystery to most of the characters in the story. But, from the very beginning this unclean spirit, this unholy symbol of the kingdoms of this world, recognizes Jesus.

He is the Holy One of God.
The Divine is in Jesus.
He is the Mighty God.

And He comes to disrupt business as usual.

Jesus confirms the evaluation of the unclean spirit by what he does.
He gives two commands.

First, he tells the unclean spirit to be quiet.
And second, he tells the unclean spirit to come out of the man.

With a loud scream, the unclean spirit comes out of the man. And how do the people respond to this miracle?

They say, "What is this? A new teaching ... with authority. He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him."

And the narrator adds,
"At once His fame began to spread around the surrounding region of Galilee."

This miracle served a purpose.

It revealed to the people that Jesus was more than just a great leader or teacher.
He was the Holy One of God, the Mighty God come in the flesh.

And this great testimony was given first not by his disciples ... but by the enemy.
Against his will the unclean spirit testifies to the power of God in Christ.

PEACE, BE STILL

A little bit later in Mark's gospel, the identity of Jesus is revealed in an even more powerful way.

Jesus and his disciples are caught in a storm at sea.
Jesus is not concerned about the wind and the waves.

In fact he's sleeping through the storm!

The desperate disciples awaken the sleeping Jesus and Jesus gives two brief commands.

"Peace! Be still!"

And after he speaks there is a dead calm on the waters.

The disciples are afraid and ask among themselves,
"Who is this that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Both of these miracles emphasize the same word, obey. Forces that are beyond the control of human beings obey Jesus.

It reminds us of the creation story when the chaos of the formless void is given shape and order by the Word of God.

The same thing is happening with Jesus' word.
When Jesus speaks, things change.
There is a new creation.

SIN AND DEATH

Jesus is the One who can say to a paralyzed man,
"Your sins are forgiven.
Take up your mat and walk."

Jesus is the One who can feed the multitude in the wilderness as a sign of the Kingdom that comes.

In this new Kingdom even the wilderness will be a place filled with abundant life.

And finally, this Messiah, this Lord of the new creation will face the most powerful foe of all, death. And he will defeat this final enemy.

He will be the new Adam.

He will be the first fruits of the eternal Kingdom that comes.

Who can command the demons to depart?

Who can command the wind and the waves?

Who can forgive sins and heal the sick?

Who can overcome death, the final enemy?

The Mighty God.

THE MIGHTY GOD AND THE DISCIPLES

Christians believe this.

But, you may ask, what difference does it make?

How do the mighty acts of God in Christ transform how we live today?

In the early church the knowledge that God was in Christ made a great deal of difference.

It gave them courage and hope in the face of a hostile world. Paul put it this way, "If God is for us who can be against us?"

If the Mighty God was in Jesus, we do not have to be afraid of the kings and the kingdoms of this world.

Nothing they can do can harm us.

If it's true, as we say each week, that in Jesus we have been forgiven ... then we can live a life free of sin and guilt. No one can put a guilt trip on us.

Instead, with a heart full of gratitude, we can serve with joy knowing that eternity is on our side.

Before the resurrection, the disciples were overwhelmed by their fear of the storm.

But, after the resurrection the disciples bravely proclaim the gospel while the wind and the waves rage.

Caesar proudly claimed the title “lord” (or God) and commanded everyone to say that it was true.

But, the early Christians boldly countered, even under the threat of persecution and death, by saying “Jesus is Lord.”

The Mighty God was not only in Christ.

Now the Spirit of this Mighty God was in the disciples of Christ.

And they became witnesses to this power throughout the ancient world.

They proclaimed a Word of grace to an ungracious world. They made real the promise of the Lord’s Prayer.

God’s kingdom came.

God’s will was done ... on earth as it was in heaven.

In a world filled with darkness, light began to shine.

THE MIGHTY GOD AND US

And that process is still going on.

The Mighty God is in the process of reshaping creation.

The Mighty God is still in the process of reshaping us.

If we believe that, if we believe that God is for us, it changes how we respond to the world.

No situation will bring us to despair because we believe that there is nothing in life that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Indeed, we believe that even death cannot separate us from that love. (Romans 8:39)

When I am feeling down about things that are going on in my life or the world, I think about the Mighty God.

One of the reasons that I am a Presbyterian is that our theology emphasizes the might of a sovereign God.

We don’t focus on who we are and what we can do.

Instead we focus upon the power of God.

Like the praise and worship song our theology sings, “What a mighty God we serve!”

The result of this emphasis on the power of God is a sense of confidence and hope in a world that is filled with despair.

We see light even on the darkest night.
We see new birth when all around us there is death.

LIGHT IN SYRIA

Several weeks ago a Christian minister in the Syrian city of Aleppo told of what he and his congregation had experienced.

Most of his flock had either fled the city or had been killed by the bombing. A church that had numbered over 700 members now only had about 50 in attendance on Sunday morning.

The interviewer asked the pastor if he saw any hope in such a desperate situation.

And the pastor said,

“We are Christians. We believe in resurrection.

Even though we can’t see things getting better right now, we know that one day things will change.

We are Christians.
We always believe that new life is possible.”

In a city destroyed by war, in the worst situation imaginable, this Christians minister was still able to offer a word of hope.

Why? Because he believed in the Mighty God.
He believed in the light that shines in the darkness.

In the gospel of John, Jesus is called the light that is not overcome by darkness. He is the Son who reveals the face of God.

THE GREEN SPRIG OF HOPE

And yet, this Mighty God often works in ways that seem small and does things that often go unnoticed.

For example, in John's gospel we learn that though God was in Christ and the world came into being through Him, the world did not recognize him.

In our Advent devotions this past week we read another prophecy from Isaiah (11:1-10). In that passage the prophet speaks of "a shoot" that "shall come out from the stump of Jesse".

What does that mean?

Part of what it means is that the Messiah, this Mighty God will come to us in ways that are small and unexpected.

The image speaks of a forest that has been destroyed and is gradually restored by the green sprigs that come from that destruction.

This past week we have been dismayed by the terrible forest fires that have devastated areas of the Great Smokey Mountains in East Tennessee.

Carrollyn and I lived in that area and fondly remember visiting Pigeon Forge and what was then Silver Dollar City (now Dollywood). So we have a particular interest and sadness when it comes to this natural disaster.

As I watched the images of destruction on TV it reminded me of the fire that destroyed large swaths of Yellowstone National Park several years ago. We all remember that.

But, what received less notice is that after the fire, new life almost immediately begins to sprout. In fact some claim the destruction of the fire is often necessary so that a new and more healthy forest can emerge.

Now there are green meadows in Yellowstone that support an abundance of plant and animal life among the ruins of the fire.

From what appeared to be dead, a new creation has begun to emerge.

This new life is so small and so fragile when it first appears that we sometimes do not even notice it.

But, God recreates the forest through these small beginnings.

Isaiah suggests that this is how the Mighty God also works when it comes to the Messiah.

The salvation of God often comes, not in the big things but in the small things.

Through the stump of Jesse, the burned out line of King David, a green shoot shall appear.

Our Advent devotional writer, Ann Garrido, reminds us that we find this pattern throughout Scripture ... God shows what she called a “preferential option” for the small.

For example, of all the peoples of the world, God chose tiny and insignificant Israel to be His special people.

God choose David, the youngest son of Jesse to be Israel’s king.

God choose that little town of Bethlehem as the place where Jesus would be born ... in a manger, a feeding trough for animals no less.

No wonder the world did not recognize the Mighty God when he came among us.

He often did not seem so mighty.

Indeed, the people often took offense at the idea that God could come in Mary and Joseph’s son.

They knew him when he was just a little boy.

Where did he get his knowledge?

Where did he get the ability to do such mighty things?

How could God work through someone who came from Nazareth? Nothing good ever comes out of Nazareth!

PAY ATTENTION TO THE SMALL THINGS

Today we still make the same mistake.
Our attention is often captivated by the big events of life.

We constantly talk about the rich and the powerful.
We bemoan the destruction caused by wars and the wrath of nature.

But, we forget that at the same time a green shoot springs forth from the stump of Jesse.
And God in Christ calls us to pay attention to those small signs of hope and new life.

Why?
Because that's how the Mighty God chooses to work.

In a manger, in the ministry of a man who lived in the backwaters of the ancient world, in a cross, in a resurrection ... the Mighty God came to redeem His people.

The new creation comes one green shoot at a time, even in the midst of death and destruction.
The new creation even comes through body broken and blood shed.

The new creation comes in a Passover meal that is transformed by the resurrection into the bread of heaven, and the hope of the world.

I love Ann's prayer at the end of her devotional this past Tuesday.
I think we should make it our prayer.

Let us pray,

"Mighty God awaken within me an awareness of where You are at work, in the tiny, hidden places of life."

Amen.