

KING JESUS

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Luke 23:33-43

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson
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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Most of us assume we know what the word "God" means. Whether or not we believe in God, we have an idea of God that tends to center on power. God is a king, an absolute monarch. God is all-powerful. And we think that power is about domination - if need be domination through fear, violence and torture. Many people, including Christians, think of God as an all powerful, absolute king who uses his almighty power to dominate and coerce.

But the Gospel challenges us to redefine God's power. The Gospel writers direct us to find God in an executed Palestinian Jew undergoing great pain - an innocent man condemned by authorities. This man - this crucified man - this suffering man is almighty God. Luke speaks of Jesus as a king enthroned on a cross. There was an inscription on the cross: "This is the King of Jews." Christians believe he is our king as well. King of kings and Lord of lords. His throne is a cross. When Christians look at Jesus we see - not simply a good man who tells us about God - but a king enthroned on a cross - and not just a king - but God enthroned on a cross.

'The other gods were strong; but Thou wast weak;
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;
But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,
And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.'

The cross of Christ redefines the meaning of power. The Cross affirms that God is all powerful. But God's power is redefined as love, not coercion, domination or violence. Nothing is more powerful than God's love. The power of God's love led God to hang on a cross. The power of God's love compelled God in Christ to put himself at risk. God's powerful love for us makes God terribly vulnerable to suffering.

We see an analogy of God's love for us in our love for our children. Our love for our children sometimes causes us unfathomable suffering. The stronger our love, the greater our suffering. We assure our children, "There's nothing you can do to make me stop loving you. There's nothing you can do to make me love you more." We don't love our kids more if they get straight A's. We don't love them less if they fail. We may get angry when they don't achieve their potential. ^{& Feroceous with them who led them astray} We may discipline them out of our love for them. But we suffer more than they do when we discipline them. We may even allow them to experience the consequences of their own bad choices - something which can cause us great pain. But our love is unconditional.

If our love isn't unconditional it ceases to be love. It becomes a sick, manipulative, coercive thing often leading to domination and violence. But when love is unconditional we hurt when our children hurt. When they're mocked, we feel their shame. When they fail, we hurt. The cross of Christ tells us that God suffers with us and for us. There are tears in the heart of the eternal God. Pain pierces God's soul. God has a real heart. God can feel. God's heart can be broken. God is really and truly all powerful but the cross of Christ redefines the meaning of God's power. God is weak in coercive power but strong in love.

Unfortunately, Christians have not always followed our king. We have such a difficult time believing that power - divine power - isn't about violence or manipulation or threats or domination or coercion. We so often take the symbol of our faith, a cross, and turn it into a weapon. Throughout much of Christian history the cross has become a symbol of earthly power. Explorers and conquerors about to plunder new territories often stopped to plant a flag that bore a cross. Soldiers have marched forward into battle with the cross of Christ emblazoned on their shields. Non-Christians, women, gay men and lesbians have often found that the cross is used as the symbol of their oppression. We who believe in the God who has come *to us* and suffered *for us* and *with us* dare not use the cross as a weapon.

Now, what if this is true? What if on the cross we see, not only an innocent man suffering, but a wounded God dying? What if God's power is not coercive power but the power of love? Let me suggest that it means at least three things.

First, if God really was present in Christ ^{suffering on the cross} we can stop asking, "why" did God allow this suffering, pain, or evil. When we ask "why" we imply that God causes suffering either *actively* as the one who inflicts it, or *passively* as the one who ought to prevent it. In contrast, the Gospel instructs us to look for God in our suffering, or pain, or evil. If we look, we'll find that God stands with us, not against us in our suffering. The God comes to us as a shepherd looking for lost, wounded sheep. God is not aloof. God in Christ does not cause but rather enters into and absorbs our suffering.

Secondly, if it's true that God's power is displayed on the cross, than nothing is more powerful than suffering love. Love, Divine love, is more powerful than coercion, intimidation, and manipulation. ^{we are empowered to fight against coercive power.} Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preached to his beleaguered congregation, "To those who hate us we shall say, 'We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you.... Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at midnight and beat us and leave us for half-dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer.'" The power of love is more powerful than the power of coercion.

Third, if it's true that God's power is displayed on the cross, than I beg of you not to believe in a health and wealth gospel. A health and wealth Gospel tells us that if we obey God we will have health and wealth. That's a false religion! An idolatrous religion! It's a godless religion! It simply baptizes secularism. The world, secularism, tells us that our chief goal in life should be health and

wealth. This is where real life is fulfilled. Success is marked by owning more things, by having more and more coercive power to do things you want to do and go where you want to go. But when we use religion as an attempt to get what we want we're participating in an idolatrous religion - even if it has all the symbols of Christianity. The religion revealed to us in the cross of Jesus calls us not to give in order to get, but to deny self, take up our cross and follow Christ wherever he leads us.

Once upon a time a king fell in love with a maid. The king found himself in a deep dilemma. Racking his mind and heart was the question, "How do I declare my love? How do I win her love?" He summoned to his palace all the wise people of his kingdom and put the question to them. They all counseled him, "Sir, nothing could be easier. Your majesty has but to appear in all your glory before the humble abode of the maiden and instantly she'll fall at your feet and be yours." But that's precisely what troubled the king. He truly loved this poor maiden and he wanted her to return his love. He didn't want to threaten or intimidate her into loving him. He didn't want to bribe her. He didn't want to subdue her with his wealth and glory and power. Night after night the king paced the floor of his palace pondering until at last he saw love's truth. "I will never know the sincerity of her love unless I come to her as her equal." So late one night, long after his courtiers and counselors had returned to their chambers, the king stole out of a side door of the palace and appeared before the humble abode of the maid dressed in peasants garb. The question that ached in his heart is, "Will she love me or reject me?"

Friends, God comes to us as one of us enthroned on a cross.

God, the God I love and worship, reigns in sorrow
on the Tree,

Broken, bleeding, but unconquered, very God of God to me. (G. A. Studdert-Kennedy)