

3 Epiphany
January 26, 2025

Sermon by Rev. Renee LiaBraaten

**In the name of the God of all creation,
the God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And in the power of God, made known in the Spirit. Amen.**

The Powers That Be

Are you ready for a couple questions? OK! Let's get started:

1. When you hear the word "power," what sorts of images or things come to mind?
2. Who are some of the most powerful people or organizations in the world today?

Do you ever feel like you are a small fish in a big ocean, where all sorts of things happen that you have no control over? You're just swimming along, doing life and a current comes out of nowhere and sweeps you into uncharted waters. Or, a big shark appears on the scene, and suddenly you must figure out how to deal with a life-threatening situation. Or, the water you've been swimming in for years starts getting warmer and WARMER and you wonder, "How warm can the water get before it's belly-up for fish like me?"

I think it is especially easy to feel like a powerless, small fish in this big ocean of a world when we watch the news. It's overwhelming to hear about all the conflicts, wars, violence and natural disasters taking place--to see all the devastation and suffering. We ask each other, "How did things get so bad? What is happening behind the scenes that is leading to these escalating tensions and unprecedented natural disasters? Who is responsible? Who is calling the shots?"

And a very intriguing phrase is often used to answer these sorts of questions. Who is making these consequential, life-altering decisions for the rest of us? It's "*the powers that be.*"

The "powers that be." We hear this phrase used when we don't know who is responsible for something that is negatively affecting our lives. A young man goes to work one morning. His boss meets him at the door of his office and says, "I'm so sorry to have you tell you this, but the company has decided to lay of several staff members, and you are one of them." The young man asks, "What? Who decided this?" And his boss replies, "I don't know—the powers that be."

Who are these "powers that be?" Do we ever actually know? But one thing we do know: the "powers that be" are creating a lot of havoc in our world today, aren't they? And our scripture readings today remind us that this is nothing new. The "powers that be" have been operating behind the scenes for a very long time.

In fact, I was stunned by the striking similarities between the two events described in our lessons for today, and two major events that took place this past week, over 2,000 years later.

In our first lesson, we find the Israelites returning to Jerusalem after having been deported to Babylon and spending over 50 years in exile there. When they were finally released by “the powers that be?” and allowed to return to the Holy City, they discovered that everything was in ruins. They had to gather for worship in the public square outside the Water Gate because the temple and synagogues had all been reduced to rubble. And when Ezra, the priest, read the scriptures to them, they wept.

Doesn't this sound like what has been unfolding this past week in that very same region of the world? A Cease-Fire negotiated by “the powers that be?” allowed the Palestinians to return to Gaza, only to find their cities and homes reduced to rubble. This weekend they gathered for worship outside the ruins of their mosques and churches. And as they heard their holy scriptures read, they wept.

In our scripture reading from Corinthians, Paul reminds us that we are all parts of one body, and that when one part of the body suffers, we all suffer. Today we join our prayers with those of our suffering brothers and sisters in Israel and Gaza, fervently praying that this cease fire will hold, and that all the losses suffered on both sides might somehow pave a path to a lasting resolution to this never-ending conflict in the Middle East.

This past Monday, another significant event occurred: the inauguration of the 47th President of the United States. In the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol, the most powerful man in the world was surrounded by some of the richest men and women in the world. There was a staggering concentration of worldly power gathered in that room.

The inauguration happened to take place on the same day that our country sets aside each year to honor the life and work of the great civil rights leader, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. But, unfortunately, the tenor of the President's Inauguration speech did not honor the legacy of Dr. King. Rather, it confirmed the fear and angst in the hearts of many people in our country, and throughout the world, about whether all this concentrated power and wealth will be used for the good of all people—all parts of this one body called humanity.

But, lo and behold, in our gospel lesson for today, we heard another inauguration speech. It was given by Jesus at the beginning of his public ministry, and it formed the foundation of Dr. King's life and work. It outlines Jesus' vision for what the people of God were called to be about in his day, and in our day.

Before we look more closely at Jesus' inauguration speech, I'd like to read the beginning of our gospel lesson one more time. “Jesus, filled with the **power** of the Spirit, returned to Galilee.” The **power of the Spirit**...What kind of power is that, exactly? We haven't talked about that kind of power yet, have we?

It occurred to me that understanding and tapping into this “power of the Spirit” may not be our strong suit. You know, our Pentecostal brothers and sisters often refer to Lutherans and Episcopalians as “the frozen chosen.” They say that our faith is all up here in our heads and when it comes to opening up to the power of the Spirit within us, we kind of put on the brakes.

Well, to whatever extent that might be true, we need to get over it. We need to open up to this **power of the Spirit**. In fact, we need to POWER UP because “desperate times call for desperate measures.”

Now, Let’s get back to Jesus’ speech. It’s very short and to the point. And it was actually written by the Prophet Isaiah, who was also very tapped in to this power of the Spirit.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has **anointed me...**”

Let’s stop right here for just a minute...I want to be sure we realize that each of us has ALSO been **anointed by the Spirit of the Lord**. It happened on the day we were baptized. God doesn’t just pour out the Holy Spirit on the big fish like Martin Luther King, Jr., or Jimmy Carter or Mother Theresa or Desmond Tutu. No. God pours out this power of the Holy Spirit on all of us in the waters of our baptism. But it is up to us to tap into that power.

So, what exactly have we been anointed for? Let’s read on...

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us,
Because God has anointed us
to bring good news to the poor,
to proclaim release to the captives
recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

The first thing I noticed about this speech, is that the people Jesus has come for, the people he is bringing good news to, are not the powerful people in the world. They are the powerless, the marginalized, the people who have no power to help themselves. Jesus makes it clear that he is going to use his power on their behalf. And we, his followers, are asked to do the same.

In this short speech, Jesus challenges all our typical notions of power. This **power of the Spirit**, the power of God, is demonstrated only through what it accomplishes for others. This is so important that I want to repeat it:

This power of the Spirit, the power of God, is demonstrated only through what it accomplishes for others.

We have been anointed—blessed—with the power of the Spirit so that we will BE a blessing in the lives of others. This power of the Spirit flows into us in order to flow through us into the lives of others to make their lives better...to help release them from whatever is holding them

back, or holding them down...anything from racist, homophobic policies to grief, illness, fear, loneliness, lack of food or shelter.

When we allow God's love, mercy, compassion and abundance to flow through us to those who need it, that is when we tap into this **power** of the Spirit.

One of my very favorite writers is a retired Methodist pastor, Steven Garnaas Holmes. He has a website called Unfolding Light. This past week he posted a meditation that beautifully captures everything I am trying to say, so I'm just going to read it to you. He writes:

Jesus' words sound like an inauguration speech:
economic policy, legal reforms, medical advances,
a liberation movement.

But it's not public policy; it's God's grace.

Jesus has no political office or power or plans.

He lives, in fact, under brutal oppression
that will stay brutal for generations.

He's not launching a campaign, but a ministry.

An insurrection of gentleness, a revolt of kindness.

It's something you're anointed for, not elected to.

Even under the thumb of Caesar,
we live in the Empire of Grace.

It is we, the people, not the emperor, who will do justice and love mercy.

Surely we will lobby, we will vote and advocate,
but we will not wait.

We ourselves will embody the coming of God's favor...

Those baptismal waters have anointed us
to be good news to the poor, to be release,
to be new sight, to be freedom,
to be God's grace.

But not on our own: it is God who anoints us,
who does this work through us: the Spirit bears us on.

My dear, dear people of St. Cyprian's--In what ways will we allow the power of the Spirit to **bear us on**...to work in us and through us to challenge the "powers that be?" How will our **hearing** of Jesus' words today be **fulfilled** in our doing?

Would you join me in prayer:

God of grace and God of glory,

on your people pour your power.

Grant us wisdom, grant us courage

for the facing of this hour.

Amen.*

*Written by the great preacher and hymnwriter, Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick