

Strength of God Creates Life

Luke Bushman, December 10th 2023. Isaiah 9:6 and Luke 2:8-20.

As we work through the different names of the Messiah listed in Isaiah 9, we arrive today at the Strength of God. I would like to start this sermon with a bit of a confession. I felt a bit sad when the names for the Messiah were assigned for each Sunday, and I found I would be speaking on the Strength of God. Not that it is a bad topic or anything, I just personally find myself more drawn to names like counselor, and prince of peace. I love therapy and relaxing. Strength, that is something I have a much more difficult relationship with. I was a very small, weak kid growing up, due to a growth disorder that has now been treated. I had a lot of confusion and insecurity regarding strength and masculinity living in a rural environment. Depictions of a big, strong tough guy God, did not help with any of that. In my social as well as spiritual life, I felt that I was lacking something important. If I was supposed to have the strength I was presented with in both my social circles and in my faith, I was greatly lacking.

Thankfully, my understanding of God's strength was an oversimplification. While the phrase "the strength of God" may evoke an image of a muscular warrior God, Jesus quite obviously defies this expectation. Jesus presents the strength of God in a much different way.

This advent season we are working through the names of the Messiah given in Isaiah 9. Advent is a season of waiting, and this season symbolizes the waiting that many have done in the best, as they awaited the coming of a savior. As we wait, reflecting on the names for the Messiah helps us to understand exactly what people were waiting for, before Jesus arrived on the scene. People were waiting for counsel, peace, strength and so much more. We have all been in a situation where we were waiting for things to change for the better. Last week Patrick spoke about the wisdom and counsel that Jesus provided, and how as a leader, Jesus was unlike any of the other leaders in that space or time. When we hear the term strength of God, we need to do some serious work to not just go with our gut understanding of the term. The strength of God is very different from where our minds go.

My mind immediately goes to a warrior God. Someone tough as nails, who shows that they are more powerful than anyone else. Someone you would not dare mess with. A being whose physical strength gives them authority that you should not question. Obviously going with our gut reaction paints a very different picture of Jesus than what we preach at a Mennonite church. Though it is

unfortunately not far from the picture that Christian Nationalists might paint of God.

This conventional understanding of strength has defined many leaders and powers throughout time. We often see Jesus how we want him to be. In this case, he is often viewed as a conqueror, holding so much power you shouldn't mess with him. He can do whatever he wants, and destroy any obstacle in his path. I recently saw a clip of a pastor yelling into a microphone saying that while last time Jesus came to shed his blood for us, next time he is coming to shed the blood of his enemies. I don't want to lose focus, so I will just say, I disagree.

This was very much the picture of strength that surrounded Jesus at the time. Walter Brueggemann, whose work has guided this sermon series, does an excellent job of outlining the way the Roman Empire exemplified this typical understanding of strength. This is true. The Romans were undoubtedly strong, possessing a ferocity that instilled fear into those who may consider stepping out of line. They had the threat of death and torture, and the resources required to overpower anyone against them. They tortured those who disrupted the order they had created, and because of their significant might, every person knew that they were not immune to the oppression of Rome. They conquered most of the world, and kept everyone in line out of fear. Truly strength and might.

Brueggemann contrasts the strength of the Roman Empire with the strength of Jesus. What makes Jesus' strength not only different but also greater than the Roman Empire? While worldly strength is established through an ability to destroy or damage, the strength of Jesus is found in his ability to create and bring life. Jesus' strength is not just different from the Roman's strength- it directly opposes and fights against it. Jesus' strength is opposition against the strength of the world. "It is clear he will not compete with the power of Rome, on the terms of Rome" (Brueggemann, 23).

Brueggemann believes that there are two clear examples in the book of Mark, where this strength is shown. In his exercising of a demon in Mark 1:21-28, and the calming of the storm in Mark 4:35-41. Of these two episodes, Brueggemann says:

"Jesus contains and subjects these deathly, chaotic threats by creating space for new life for the man and then for the disciples. Jesus is the giver of life who performs the function of the creator God. Thus without identifying the Son with the Father who is the creator of heaven and earth,

the Gospel stories attest that in Jesus of Nazareth the early church has seen exhibited the power of God for life” (Brueggemann 27-28)

Jesus' strength comes from the power to preserve and create new life, not from the ability to destroy it. Jesus' strength and power is not built on fear, but on bringing life and order into the world. What a wonderful reason to follow someone. Not because you are afraid to not follow them- but because where they go, new life springs up.

Even from his birth, the arrival of Jesus seems to bring about new life and energy. While shepherds may have been physically strong, you certainly would not associate a shepherd with power to affect the world around them. This is why their portion of the Christmas story is tied to our sermon today. Because they need the life of Jesus to spring up in them, if they are going to affect change. R. Alan Culpepper writes:

“Shepherding was a despised occupation at the time. Although the reference to shepherds evokes a positive, pastoral image for the modern reader and underscores Jesus' association with the line of David... in the first century, shepherds were scorned as shiftless, dishonest people who grazed their flocks on others' lands. Against this background, it is possible that Luke gets double duty from the shepherds—first, developing further Jesus' connection with David and Bethlehem, and, second, graphically picturing Jesus as one sent to the lowly and outcast.” (Culpepper, Luke 2:8).

When we compare the description of shepherds here, with the depiction of them in Luke 2, the contrast is striking. The shepherds in Luke 2 are amazed, and leave the scene of the birth praising God and spreading the news. This is the upside down kingdom of Jesus, that shepherds are not merely in attendance for his grand arrival, but they are the invited guests, chosen to witness this momentous occasion. Jesus shows the strength of God by creating space for life for the shepherds.

Imagine being a shepherd. Lonely work, hard work, and not very appreciated work. Looked down upon by the population. Going through another arduous night of working. The job is at times soul sucking, and the isolation, depressing to say the least. And then one evening the sky lights up. There is a great and magnificent sign and you are told that tonight is one of the most

momentous nights in history. And you and your coworkers are invited to be a part of it. This fills you with excitement you haven't felt in years and your race to see this great occasion. You leave encouraged, telling others of your selection to see such a magnificent event. These shepherds had their lives changed, and the fact that they were invited to the birth of Jesus, shows just how upside down the Kingdom of God is. Jesus brings life and energy even as a baby, and gives that life and energy to the outcast and the downtrodden.

The strength of God is found in bringing life into the world. When we try to replicate the strength of God, we create space for life in our world. We confront oppression, so the oppressed have space for joy. We take in the sick and the lonely, so they have hope for tomorrow. We bring love into situations of hate, so that others may find peace.

I love Brueggemann's interpretation of the strength of God, far more than my conventional or traditional understanding of strength. I think back to all the times where I felt out of place growing up. The times where I felt weak, scared, and incapable of fighting against things around me. I think I would have felt a lot better about myself, had I known that the Strength of God is not found in conquering enemies, but in making space for life. Creating, growing, organizing. Making space for lifegiving attitudes of empathy, compassion and love. I hope as we leave here we can see the strength of God in the life constantly being made to flourish around us. I hope we can show that strength by making space for new life and love.

Works Cited

Culpepper, R. Alan. *The New Interpreters Bible Commentary*. VIII, Abingdon Press, 2015.

Brueggemann, Walter. *Names for the Messiah: An Advent Study*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2016.