

Kingdom, Power, & Glory
Exodus 33:17-23
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This autumn our worship series has been exploring the Lord's Prayer, going line by line, and examining in some detail the meaning of the phrases and their theological and spiritual implications. Today we arrive at the very end, to the final line of the prayer as many of us know it, "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen."

For my text today I've chosen an Old Testament story, when Moses the leader of the Exodus and the lawgiver of Israel, while in conversation with God asks God if he can see God's glory. Hear now the word of the Lord.

Exodus 33:17-23

The Lord said to Moses, "I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name." Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray." And God said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The Lord'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But," God said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." And the Lord continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

For the Word of God in scripture,
For the Word of God among us,
For the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God.

Two weeks ago I told Sebastian, our four-and-a-half-year-old son, that I was preaching on "Deliver us from evil." He asked, "Are you talking about the part with the 'power'?" I told him it would be the next week, and he responded "Yea!"

For some months now, during our bedtime routine, when I pray the Lord's Prayer, Sebastian has taken to repeating the various phrases after me, so he is slowly learning the prayer himself. Besides adding butter to the prayer for our daily bread, he has one other interesting affectation when we pray the prayer. When we get to "thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory," when he says power, he thrusts his fist upward.

I have no idea where he got this. Maybe some superhero image?

On Wednesday I picked him up at preschool to bring him to Wednesday night church. He immediately asked, "Are you talking about the power?" "Not tonight," I answered. "That's Sunday." He then responded, "Well, I want you to talk about the power a lot."

I'm now getting sermon advice and feedback from my four-year-old.

Clearly "the power" is his favourite part of the prayer.

On Facebook this week, I posted that story, and Pam Branscome replied, "What's so attractive about power? Even a 4-year old knows!"

Indeed. In a life that is often complicated and messy, when we aren't sure what to do, when other people are often telling us what to do, where things sometimes don't make sense at all, we humans want at least a little power. A little choice, freedom, authority. Right?

Today, then, let's ponder what is this divine power we are praising? How is it connected to God's glory and God's reign? And how does the divine power affect our lives?

This final line of the prayer that so many of us have memorized appears in modern translations of the Gospel of Matthew but not in Luke's version of the prayer. Yet, even in Matthew it is apparently an addition to the text and not original. The line seems to have originated from the *Didache*, a first century Christian text that almost made it into the canon, and which remained an influential source for understanding the early Christian life.

Despite it probably not being original to the Gospel, it is still a grand ending to the prayer. Theologian Timothy Bradshaw describes how it "catches the mood of the whole prayer. It expresses trust and joy in God."

God is the goodness we crave, so we focus our attention and our desire on the highest good. We are drawn to God's glory, magnify our praise, and rest in contemplation of the one who love us. And through that love we are strengthened and encouraged.

The Exodus passage I opened with is a somewhat odd story. During the Exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt, they are in the wilderness of the Sinai peninsula where Moses is in conversation with God about what will happen next. This is the time when God is sharing the covenant. Part of the covenant, the Ten Commandments, will be written on stone tablets by God.

In this moment of intimate, divine presence, God and Moses are talking, and Moses asks to see God's glory. God warns that the glory is too much for a man to see and live, but God will grant the wish, to a degree. Moses will be protected in a cleft of the rock, somewhat shielded from divine power by God's hand. And he won't see the face of God, only the backside. Is there even a little humor in this story?

While exploring the concept of God's glory this week, I was drawn to this uncanny story by the theologian Sallie McFague. McFague died last week after a long career as one of the great theologians of our time.

If you read my column in the church newsletter, you know I first encountered her work while a student at Oklahoma Baptist University when Warren McWilliams picked her brand new book *The Body of God* for his Contemporary Theology class. In an exchange with Dr. McWilliams's daughter this week, she conveyed her dad's message that he taught several of Sallie McFague's books over the years and that "they usually stretched students, especially the more conservative ones."

At the time McFague's interests resonated with my own, as I was trying to reconcile my theology with science and to incorporate a more ecological way of thinking into my worldview. She indeed stretched me. McFague's book was the first work of feminist theology I read, and the first work of eco-theology. She is often described as an eco-feminist theologian.

Her first major contributions to theology were in analyzing the role of metaphors in talking about God. I referenced her work in this vein in the very first sermon in this series, when we discussed the name of God that opens this prayer, "Our Father." McFague taught that all speech about God is metaphor. The traditional metaphors for God, including names like Father, King, and Lord, have served important functions in the life of the church. But she wondered if, in our contemporary context, they were helping us. She wrote that the metaphors and the names for God we used should heal and not harm. So, in her work *Models of God*, she proposed the images of Mother, Lover, and Friend for talking about God.

McFague's interest eventually became focused on ecology; she even spent some time working with the Dalai Lama on this topic. She wanted to renew theology to help us address our ecological concerns. Her book *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* was a bold proclamation moving the Christian church forward.

My copy of the book is falling apart from overuse. It came apart even more this week, as I was reviewing the work, remembering McFague and her influence upon me. And, thus, I came across her discussion of God's glory, centered in this uncanny story from the Book of Exodus where Moses asks to see the glory of God.

McFague describes this Exodus story as "a wonderful mix of the outrageous and the awesome," because it implies a physicality to God. That God has a body with a face and hands and a backside. What she finds in the story is the revelation that "God is not afraid of the flesh." Here is an incarnationalism that she wants to lean into. What if we took this idea seriously, that God has a body. If so, can we see God's body in the things around us? She imagines so. Here's what she says,

Like Moses, when we ask, 'Show me your glory,' we might see the humble bodies of our own planet as visible signs of the invisible grandeur. . . . We might begin to see the marvels at our feet and at our fingertips: the intricate splendor of an Alpine forget-me-not or a child's hand. We might begin to realize the extraordinariness of the ordinary. We would begin to delight in creation, not as the work of an external deity, but as a sacrament of the living God. We would see creation as bodies alive with the breath of God. We might realize what this tradition has told us . . . we live and move and have our being *in* God. We might see ourselves and everything else as the living body of God.

If we were to do that, if we were to lean into the idea that God is physically present with us, and that physicality is contained in the world around us, how would that alter our understanding of God?

McFague continues:

We would, then, have an entire planet that reflects the glory, the very being . . . of God. We would have a concrete panorama for meditation on divine glory and transcendence:

wherever we looked, whether at the sky with its billions of galaxies (only a few visible to us) or the earth (every square inch of which is alive with millions of creatures) or into the eyes of another human being, we would have an image of divine grandeur. The more we meditated on these bits of the divine body, the more intricate, different, and special each would become.

She writes that we would become more compassionate toward painful bodies: “We cannot in good conscience marvel with aesthetic delight at the one and not identify with the pain of the other: bodies are beautiful and vulnerable.” She continues, “Praising God in and through the beauty of bodies entails caring for the most basic needs of all bodies on the planet.” Thus “the aesthetic and the ethical unite.”

If we experience God’s glory this way, not as something remote, but something present in all physical existence, then we will reconceive our notions of power. According to Sallie McFague this organic model rejects the image of God as king where “the world is the realm of a distant, external ruler who has all power and expects unquestioned obedience from his subjects.”

Instead, we would locate divine power in the ordinary bodies all around us and that would lead us to wonder. Which would make us better people, more responsible to ourselves, to our neighbors, and to the earth.

To see the world as God’s body would transform our understanding. We would then “reconstruct [our] lives and [our] work to help our earth survive and prosper.”

We mourn this important thinker who has helped to guide the Christian church into a new and better sensibility, a richer understanding of the Gospel, and a deeper commitment to the issues of the world.

McFague’s interesting reflection upon God’s glory didn’t enter deeply into the topic of divine power. For that I returned this week to Rita Nakashima Brock and her classic book *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*. Brock writes that our conventional notions of power are “colored by our experiences of life in societies of male dominance.” But these conventional notions are mistaken. The real power of life is born into us and has the capacity to heal, make whole, encourage, and liberate. This power emerges from our hearts. This is the power of incarnate love.

For Brock divine power is found “in the community of those who heal and minister to each other.” The power Jesus proclaimed and participated in is available to us in the church. She writes, “the community sustains life-giving power by its memory of its own brokenheartedness and of those who have suffered and gone before and by its members being courageously and redemptively present to all.”

Divine power arises in us, then, when we work together to heal our broken hearts. Divine power arises out of our vulnerability. Our capacity to feel deeply, which brings to us both pain and ecstatic delight. Divine power is the connection we feel to one another, the nurture and care we provide, sharing from our vulnerability to help heal each other.

Divine power is not distant and remote, but deep within each and every one of us. It is born into us, and we nurture it in relationship and community. God's spirit works with us and through us to give us the support and encouragement we need to survive and thrive.

If Christ is going to reign in us, then we need to see God's glory evident in everything around us and in ourselves. We need to reconceive our notions of power away from domination and toward healing. We need to tap into the power already present in us and in our relationships.

What we learn from these thinkers is that we are already vessels of God's glory and God's power. Our spiritual task in prayer is to awaken that vitality, so that it might be for us a source of energy and strength. Filling us with all the other good blessings of God.

In prayer we are led to contemplate God in all of God's beauty and awesomeness. To delight in goodness and enjoy the blessings. To rest in God's love and by that love to receive strength and encouragement.

The final line of the Lord's Prayer, this grand statement of adoration and praise, is a realization—the goodness we crave, the fulfillment of our desires, the love of God, is already with us. To pray is to be attentive to this reality.

So, let us pray as Jesus taught us to pray, "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen."