

Sermon by Rev. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
Second Sunday of Lent  
March 16, 2003

**Prayer, Power and the Powers**  
**Ephesians 6:10-12, 18-20; Mark 8:31-38**

In a roundabout way, today's sermon is about the power of prayer  
in a world where so many other powers are at work.

We will begin with the reading from Ephesians,  
and end up with the reading from the Gospel of Mark.

The reading from Ephesians is not from the lectionary for today.  
Rather, I chose it because it expresses so poignantly how I feel,  
and perhaps how other feel, about the crisis of terror and war faced by our world.  
Now, I realize the dangers of preaching about the world situation:  
primarily, that you will stop listening,  
because like me you have reached the saturation point with the news about  
Iraq, the U.N., and the looming war.  
But as a Christian, and as a pastor and preacher,  
I cannot bring myself to ignore the situation from the pulpit;  
it's too big, too real, too important.  
And since I think it's worse to preach sermons that are boring and irrelevant  
than to preach sermons that offend people, I'll err on the side of offense.

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The Ephesians, Paul tells us:

*For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh,  
but against the rulers, against the authorities,  
against the cosmic powers of this present darkness,  
against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*

The scriptures would have us understand that, in any age,  
and in our age no less than in others,  
the primary battle that the Church must fight is not against any human being  
or any human institution  
but against cosmic powers and spiritual forces.

In 1932, amid the gathering storm of World War II,  
Deitrich Bonhoeffer drew upon the imagery of Ephesians and asked,  
"How can one close one's eyes at the fact  
that the demons themselves have taken over the rule of the world,  
that it is the powers of darkness who have here made an awful conspiracy."

But what are these cosmic powers, these spiritual forces?<sup>1</sup>

We can interpret this concept in several different ways:

Some have thought of the powers as simply human institutions and structures,  
putting little or no emphasis on their “spiritual” nature.

Examples of “the powers” in this understanding would be  
“big government” or “big business” or “the media” or “a terrorist network.”

Other interpreters, mostly in the evangelical camp,  
have strongly emphasized the “spiritual” nature of the powers,  
even arguing that they are independent, personal spiritual beings  
with personalities, and motives, and willfulness.

One popular version of this view can be found in a book that came out in the late 80’s,  
but which I still see on the shelves in the bookstores today.

The book, *This Present Darkness*, by Frank Peretti,  
draws its title from our Ephesians passage,  
and tells an imaginative story of these independent spiritual beings  
that float around in the spirit world acting on the material world of human life,  
nudging and suggesting and coercing  
and accomplishing their purposes through the people they haunt or bless.

One of my teachers, Chuck Campbell, at Columbia Seminary,  
suggests a third, more pragmatic approach:

On the one hand, we should not deny the existence of “spiritual beings” in the world.  
Just listen to our fellow Christians in Jamaica, for example,  
tell stories about demon-possession and exorcisms  
and you will at least hold out the possibility that they exist.

On the other hand, you and I tend to encounter the cosmic powers more commonly,  
and a good deal more subtly,  
“as they are spiritually at work  
in and through concrete, material institutions, structures, systems [and networks]  
in the world.”<sup>2</sup>

Consider these examples of “the powers”...

The explosive growth of technology, and our manic dependence on it.  
The expansion of technology has taken on a life of its own,  
and it’s all we can do to keep up, to keep ahead of the obsolescence curve.  
We are enslaved to the technology race.

Or consider global capitalism.

I’m talking about something more than just the good old free enterprise system,  
a concept which is becoming a sort of nostalgic memory,

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<sup>1</sup> This following discussion of “the powers” draws substantially on Charles L. Campbell’s work in *The Word Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching*, 6-23.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 15.

like turntable record players and rotary phones.  
Global capitalism becomes more than the simple free enterprise system  
when it takes the form of multinational corporations that, like technology,  
have taken on a life of their own.  
These mammoth conglomerates become a powerful force,  
and even though the men and women who work for them may be good people  
with solid convictions  
these good souls have little power to effect change in these corporate monstrosities.  
When the shareholders come calling, the moral game is over  
and it's time to show a profit, no matter who gets trampled in the process.

John Steinbeck, in his classic novel *The Grapes of Wrath*,  
tells of the work of this kind of power in the Dust Bowl of the United States  
during the Great Depression, when the men who worked the land – the tenant farmers –  
were gradually evicted by the owners of the land  
because the land was used up and no longer able to produce a crop.

Steinbeck writes:

“Some of the owner men were kind because they hated what they had to do,  
and some of them were angry because they hated to be cruel,  
and some of them were cruel, and some of them were cold  
because they had long ago found that one could not be an owner unless one were cold.  
And all of them were caught in something larger than themselves.  
Some of them hated the mathematics that drove them, and some were afraid,  
and some worshiped the mathematics because it provided a refuge  
from thought and from feeling.  
If a bank or a finance company owned the land, the owner man said,  
The Bank – or the Company – needs – wants – insists – must have –  
as though the Bank or the Company were a monster, with thought and feeling,  
which had ensnared them.  
These last would take no responsibility for the banks or the companies  
because they were men and slaves,  
while the banks were machines and masters all at the same time.”

The tenant men cried out against their fate,  
claiming that being born on the land, working the land, dying on the land,  
makes ownership – not a paper with numbers on it.  
“We’re sorry [say the owners]. It’s not us. It’s the monster. The bank isn’t like a man.  
Yes, but the bank is only made of men.  
No, you’re wrong there – quite wrong there. The bank is something else than men.  
It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it.  
The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It’s the monster.  
Men made it, but they can’t control it.”

Where Steinbeck describes a bank, or a corporation,  
we could describe other things:

What about a worldwide network of terrorists?

To be sure, this is different because the people involved intend, very seriously intend, to do harm to those they declare as their enemies.

At the same time, they are no doubt trapped in a network that has enslaved them.

I'm not sure how one would safely pull out of a network like Al Qaeda once involved, without putting one's self and family in grave danger.

They are slaves to organized hatred.

And, from all that we hear, Al Qaeda has clearly taken on a life of its own and seems to slither around the globe quite independently of direct instructions from any single leader, Osama or whoever.

We may kill the leaders of this beast –

just as Steinbeck's farmers wanted to shoot the men at the bank –  
but the power that enslaves them will live on.

Well, enough said about the powers. You get the picture.

*Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh,  
but against the rulers, against the authorities,  
against the cosmic powers of this present darkness,  
against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*

NEVERTHELESS,

As we stand before these powers, we do not despair  
because we have good news to announce before the powers,  
to the powers, and to all who are enslaved by the powers,  
which is all of us, in one way or another.

The good news that we proclaim  
is that God has more power than the powers.

Indeed, God created every powers that exists; they are God's creatures,  
grotesque in their corruption, but God's creatures nonetheless.

And that means God can redeem them from their corruption.

God can redeem the powers and turn them toward the good.

This may be a statement of sheer faith

because in our limited minds and imagination,  
it is hard to see how God can redeem the enslaving powers of hatred  
like Al Qaeda.

but Colossians teaches us

that all things in heaven and on earth were created through Christ  
and were intended to serve Christ's purposes,  
and therefore can be redeemed by Christ.

Which brings us back, in closing, to the story of Jesus and Peter,  
and to the subject of our prayers, and the power of our prayers.

Now the story of Jesus predicting his own suffering and death at the hand of the powers  
is not, on the face of it, a story about prayer,

except that what we witness here is an exchange between Jesus and his disciples.  
And in our experience today, such an exchange between us and our Lord  
happens in the form of prayer, or prayerful listening.

When Peter hears Jesus say that he must die at the hands of the powers of darkness,  
Peter will have nothing of it.  
In this story, the power is the corrupted religious system of Israel,  
corrupted beyond recognition.  
And Peter cannot stomach the idea of this corrupt power having its way with Jesus.  
So Peter, the disciple, rebukes Jesus, the master.  
No doubt Peter has in mind something else, something more “effective” than dying,  
who knows what?

But Jesus turns the rebuke around and sets Peter straight, calling him Satan,  
which means – ironically –  
that Peter has aligned himself with the very powers that oppose Jesus.  
And in the strange logic of the gospel  
Jesus goes on to say that anyone who would be his disciple  
must resist the powers of darkness, even if it means losing one’s life.  
And the reason this logic works, says Jesus,  
is that the Son of Man is sovereign over every power,  
and will be coming in glory one day to depose the cosmic powers  
that have pretended to rule the world.

We, of course, must live in the meantime, in the time between the times,  
when the corrupted powers still hold sway over the world.  
And so it is that our greatest resource in this life, in this world, is prayer;  
Spirit-led communion with the God made known in Jesus Christ,  
the One who created the powers and who alone can redeem the powers.  
So, *Finally*, Paul exhorts us,  
*be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.*  
*Put on the whole armor of God,*  
*so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil...*  
*Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.*  
*To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.*

We may feel as if there is little we can do in the face of the world powers  
who drag us into all sorts of violence and evil.  
But if Jesus can be believed, then the most powerful thing we can do to resist the powers  
is to pray – with all our mind and heart – to pray  
that God will redeem the earth,  
that God’s kingdom would come, God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Paul would say to us today,  
don’t pick up a newspaper,  
don’t turn on the TV,  
don’t listen to a news update on the radio

without devoting that moment to prayer,  
and many moments after it.

Pray – pray without ceasing –  
and the power that made heaven and earth will attend you  
and help you bear your cross.  
Amen.