

Isaiah 11:1-10 (NIV)

- ¹ A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
- ² The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—
- ³ and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.
He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;
- ⁴ but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the
earth.
- He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
- ⁵ Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.
- ⁶ The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.
- ⁷ The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
- ⁸ The infant will play near the cobra's den,
and the young child will put its hand into the viper's
nest.
- ⁹ They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.
- ¹⁰ In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the
peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will
be glorious.

Matthew 3:1-12 (NIV)

- ¹ In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the
wilderness of Judea ² and saying, "Repent, for the
kingdom of heaven has come near." ³ This is he who was
spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:
"A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.'"
- ⁴ John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had
a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and
wild honey. ⁵ People went out to him from Jerusalem
and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. ⁶
Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the
Jordan River.
- ⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and
Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to
them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee
from the coming wrath?" ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with
repentance. ⁹ And do not think you can say to
yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you
that out of these stones God can raise up children for
Abraham. ¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees,
and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be
cut down and thrown into the fire.
- ¹¹ "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after
me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose
sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you
with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in
his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering
his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with
unquenchable fire."

Exercising Power for Love (Isaiah 11:6-9 and Mt 3:4-11)

This morning I want to talk about power; that is, the unique personal power that each of us have. In their book, *Having The Mind of Christ*,¹ priests Matt Tebbe & Ben Sternke explain that every living person has *some measure* of power. For example, on a very basic level, "Most of us can choose what shirt to wear on any given day, or which route to take to work, or what to have for dinner." But even *on* this basic level our power can be limited. Perhaps you have a job where you can't just wear anything you want. Or someone dealing with food insecurity often doesn't get to *choose* what they have for dinner.

But, beyond this *basic* level, each of us also possesses a certain level of power in the different relationships we have. This could be the power to **influence** others, such as in our relationship with a spouse, with siblings, with adult children or friends. In other relationships we may possess even more power, where we actually have **some degree of control** over the lives of others, such as if we're parents

¹ *Having the Mind of Christ*, by Matt Tebbe & Ben Sternke, InterVarsity Press 2022. Available to read or listen to for free at www.hoopladigital.com with a Stanislaus library card.

of children who are not yet adults, if we're caring for an aging parent, or if we're in authority over others in the workplace.

Then, even beyond that: in addition to the power we have in different relationships, each one of us also has different measures of power on a cultural level, based on our gender, wealth, race, class, if we have some position of influence, and so on. Generally speaking, in our society men tend to possess more power than women,² the rich have more power than the poor, and so on. Now, Tebbe & Sternke observe that with cultural power, when someone lives on the *weaker* side of the power dynamic, they **have to** be aware of it out of necessity - or they come to be aware of it pretty quickly in order to survive. For example, a woman in our society must typically learn to be aware of herself and take precautions for her preservation & well-being that a man might never even cross a man's mind, right?

So, to give us a clearer understanding about cultural power dynamics, the analogy that Tebbe & Sternke provide is the difference between biking with a *tailwind* versus biking with a *headwind*: when we're biking with a tailwind, we may not always even be aware of it, other than thinking, "Hey, I'm pretty good at this biking thing!" But when we bike against a headwind, we become aware very quickly of the power we lack. So, sticking with the gender inequity example, as men are probably oblivious to many of the things we don't have to worry about that a woman has to, *unless or until* a woman makes us aware of these challenges they may experience, such as in regard to their physical safety or the classic being taken seriously in the boardroom, among undoubtedly many other examples. But again, imbalance of power between the two sexes is only one example of cultural power imbalances; as I also mentioned categories like wealth, education, race, authority in the workplace, certain training, and so on; and we don't have time to unpack each of them, but hopefully you get the idea.³ However, God's love always reckons with power,⁴ and as we seek to live and love like Jesus, He is calling us to do the same. Indeed, perhaps the next horizon that awaits many of us on our spiritual journey is to grow in our capacity to *discern power differentials at play* in our lives and in the world around us - to begin considering the power we possess and how we use it - so that God can begin giving us an imagination for how we might exercise it in support of those who lack it, because as we learn to do this it will actually be to the benefit of everyone involved, including ourselves. So, this morning I want to exercise the power of this pulpit for the well being of all to proclaim this good news: that Jesus wants to teach us to exercise power we have to bless those who lack it. And while it may feel counterintuitive, when we do this for others (in healthy ways) it will not only benefit them, but us as well.

And this good news for all is the message of today's passage from Isaiah 11 today. The first five verses are of course a prophecy about Christ: who will be born from the tree of Jesse's line and rule His Kingdom with righteousness and wisdom. But verses 6 through 9 uses the metaphor of what that righteousness looks like by using the metaphor of power differentials intrinsic to the animal kingdom. Look with me: Isaiah writes,

² And we've been socialized to accept that.

³ Here is another example of this that Tebbe provides: "I (Matt) remember a conversation with my friend Pat. A six-foot-eight White man, Pat couldn't believe that his height gave him social power in most of the rooms he walked into. He had noticed that people usually deferred to him and listened to him, but thought it was based on his intellect and charm. I'm five feet ten, and it was clear to me that other people changed the way they inhabited a space when Pat showed up. His body organized and ordered other bodies in ways obvious to me, but unrecognizable to him. After some long conversations, Pat began to notice how his height gave him power he wasn't aware of (remember the image of riding a bicycle with a 20-mph tailwind). Pat was "looked up to" (literally) and trusted. Many people assumed he was some sort of celebrity athlete and wanted to be around him, while others were a bit intimidated by his stature. Everyone got quiet when he spoke. In general people just assumed he knew what he was talking about, deferred to him in situations where decisions needed to be made, and very few challenged him or disagreed with him directly. Another friend of mine, Jim, is a six-foot-five, 320-pound Black man, and he, in contrast to Pat, has always been aware of the power his body carries in the world. Why was Jim dialed into the power of his body's stature but Pat wasn't? One reason is that our culture tells a different story about Jim's large Black male body than it does about Pat's large White male body. As a Black man, Jim has had to cultivate an awareness of the power of his stature because it is construed as dangerous in our society."

⁴ To read about how Jesus was always reckoning with power in his earthly ministry, read all of chapter 7 of the Tebbe & Sternke book.

- ⁶ The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.
- ⁷ The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
- ⁸ The infant will play near the cobra's den,
and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.
- ⁹ They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

This picture of creatures coexisting in an otherworldly way is a metaphor for the way of living that Jesus seeks to lead us into, which scripture calls “the Kingdom of God”. And this image is one where predators & prey are living at peace together. Of course, if we read this literally it can seem sorta like nonsense, because the food chain of creatures preying on one another is necessary for animals to survive. But when understood as a metaphor for our use of power, it becomes a vision for the way God wants to transform how we relate to one another and to all with any power we possess.

Scholar Chris Green explains⁵ that in this passage we have this image of predators - the wolf, the leopard, the lion, and the cobra - living alongside creatures they could *easily harm* - and often do(!) - by exercising the power they have over them, whether in strength or venom. But this image gives a metaphor of how, through our baptism into Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, God intends to bring transformation to the ways we use any-power-we-have for the benefit of those who lack it.⁶ The good news is that Jesus wants to teach us to exercise power we have to bless those who lack it, as He did for *all* of us as the son of God. And while it may feel counterintuitive, when we do this for others (in healthy ways) it will not only benefit them, but us as well.

And yet, living this way does not come naturally to us at all, as in our sin we tend toward using any power advantages we may have for our *own* advancement, at times even at the *expense* of others. And this sin is actually what God identifies in today's passage from Matthew 3 through the prophetic voice of John the Baptist to the religious leaders of his day,

The first 6 verses of Matthew 3 say that John was preaching a message of repentance in the wilderness of Judea and baptizing all who came out to him. So it sounds like quite a revival! But in verse 7, when some Pharisees and Sadducees came out, John says to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” So John is really getting on these guys. And the reason is because of the power these guys possess and how they use it.

As I've mentioned before, some 80 percent of Jews in those days lived in poverty. These were the have-nots, who possessed very little power, and *they* were the ones who'd been coming out to John for baptism up to this point. But these Pharisees & Sadducees, they were the *haves*: they possessed a *lot* of cultural power. They were not only wealthy; they were men in a society where the gender power imbalance was much worse than ours today; *and* most significantly they held authority as religious leaders - meaning they were the ones who taught people what God is like and also functioned as the morality police, who could even have those who broke certain commandments stoned to death (!).

⁵ SpeakeasyTheology Podcast - “(2) Judgment: God's Gonna Cut You Down” 11/29/22
https://open.substack.com/pub/cewgreen/p/gods-gonna-cut-you-down?utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web

⁶ So if we're worried about how on earth the wolf would be able to eat here, we're pressing the metaphor to far, for the wolf living with the lamb and the child playing near the viper is nothing more than a visual parable for the new way of possessing power in the Kingdom of God that Jesus is inviting us into.

So these Pharisees & Sadducees tended to use the cultural power they had in ways that benefited themselves rather than seeking to lift others up; which leads John to confront these guys to see if they're even *open* to seeing ways they might be using their power sinfully. Though, it should be said that John really does this in love for *them*, because otherwise they're going to miss out on the kingdom life the Lord desires for all of us. The good news is that Jesus wants to teach us to exercise power we have to bless those who lack it, like He has done for *all* of us, because, while it may feel counterintuitive, when we do this for others (in healthy ways) it will not only benefit them, but us as well.

So, I wonder if we might take the step of asking the Lord to reveal to us ways we we have power cultural power through in terms of wealth, training, gender, race, education, in the workplace, or whatever, and show us ways we can exercise it to bless or lift others up, trusting that living this way will lift us up as well. As St. Paul taught the leaders in the Ephesian Church: "...we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"⁷ The good news is that Jesus wants to teach us to exercise power we have to bless those who lack it, as He did for *all* of us as the son of God. And while it may feel counterintuitive, when we do this for others (in healthy ways) it will not only benefit them, but us as well.

But, I said earlier that in addition to cultural power we may have, there are also power dynamics in our personal relationships. So I want to also invite us to think about the power we may possess in our personal relationships and how we use it.

Beginning with marriage, power dynamics are constantly at play in our marriages. And before us there are always temptations to lord over our spouse or to live like they lord over us. So, lording over them looks like using power we have in the relationship to control or manipulate our spouse to be the way we want them to be.

On the other hand, we can let our spouse lord over us or live like they do, by putting our energy primarily toward appeasing them & living constantly anxious about keeping them spouse happy (which, by the way is a different posture than one of seeking to bless them). One sign that dysfunctional keep-the-spouse-happy dynamic is at play is when we have a mentality of working on the brownie point system. This is an imaginary system of seeking to earn points with our spouse by doing something pleasing - like doing chores, giving compliments, or planning dates - to gain their favor or approval, with the mentality that these points can then be "cashed in" for future favors, such as buying you some expensive gift or doing something fun apart from them, or maybe even for sex (yep, I said it), or some may feel like they're on a long term plan of accruing brownie points to make for something hurtful done in the past.

These power dynamics - of lording over our spouse or living like they lord over us - these are the ruts that frankly most of our marriages slip into if not guarded against. While, what will instead make our marriages more of a blessing to both of us is when we exercise whatever power we have in the relationship in healthily sacrificial ways: by putting our energy toward accepting them, toward examining the log in our own eye rather than the speck in theirs, and seeking to bless & serve them, but without any agenda of getting something in return. For those of us who are married, how are we exercising our power in that relationship of late? Well, change can be hard and could necessitate outside help, but the blessing that is there for us to attain is worth every bit of effort we're willing to put into it. #

The good news is that Jesus wants to teach us to exercise power we have to bless others, not to control them or gain their favor. And while this may feel counterintuitive, when we do this for others (in healthy ways) it will not only benefit them, but us as well.

And what I've said here doesn't just apply to marriage, but to all relationships between equals: friends, other family members, fellow parishioners, everyone. But finally, what about relationships where

⁷ Acts 20:35

there is an appropriate power imbalance? For example, in a parent's relationship with their child who is not yet an adult. Tebbe & Sternke note that this relationship is one where there is a *massive* power imbalance. Well, as startling as it may sound, that image from Isaiah of an infant near a cobra's den and a child playing near a viper's nest is an apt image for the potential we parents have to do our children good or ill based upon how they exercise the tremendous power they have over their lives. And if we let sin reign in our parenting, and use that power to try to conform them to become the person we want them to be, driven for example by how so they 'reflect well *on us as a parent*' (*whatever we think that looks like*), then we're going to be using our power for their harm, but we're also going to miss out on one of the greatest blessings in life of learning and experiencing who God made them to be and is making them to be. So, I wonder if those of us who are parents - or grandparents or godparents - might take the step of asking the Lord to give us an imagination for we can nurture these children in ways aimed at their flourish into the people He has made and is making them to be. Ask, and we shall receive. The good news is that Jesus wants to teach us to exercise power we have to bless those who lack it, as He did for *all* of us as the son of God. And while it may feel counterintuitive, when we do this for others (in healthy ways) it will not only benefit them, but will bless us as well.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.