

First Presbyterian Church  
Cheyenne, Wyoming  
November 15, 2009  
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Worship Theme: What is Your Power Base?  
I Samuel 2: 1-10, Hebrews 10: 11-25, Mark 13: 1-8

Power has become an important and divisive issue in our day. Everything under the sun, including the sun is being debated as the source of power for our world. The power of someone's political pull, war powers acts, the power of the health care lobbies and the power of ONE are often in the midst of many disagreements. We have power bars and power drinks, some good for us and some not. An illustration of how vital power is to us is reflected in the 70,900,000 sites on Goggle that talk about power. By contrast there are only 30,900,000 about God. Obviously, power is an important topic to human beings and God appears to be of lesser value by the Goggle survey.

In the light of all this could it be that as God's children we think we do not need the power of God to help us live, solve our problems and give us new life? Have we become like two year-olds who often proclaim, "I do it myself." Could it be that in our desire to be self-sufficient we are like the cattle rancher in the following story? And, do we need hear someone startle us awake to the need we have for God like the pastor in the story does?

There was "a cattle rancher who despised religion as something only for wimps. The local pastor had visited him a number of times, but he got nowhere against the grizzled one's spiritual intransigence. In fact, the last time the preacher had dared approach the ranch house he had been run off with a shotgun. The rancher had always taken care of himself. He didn't need any namby-pamby religion stuff to make a go of his life. That is what he taught his three sons as well."

"So the pastor was mighty surprised one day to get an urgent call from the ranch. Could he come out right away and have prayer with Tom, one of the rancher's sons? Rushing out to the ranch house he found the doctor leaving. 'Snakebite,' said the doctor. 'There's nothing more I can do.'

The rancher welcomed the pastor with uncharacteristic warmth and pulled him quickly through the house to a room where Tom was writhing on the bed. 'Could you say a prayer for him?' asked the worried father. He took off his hat, revealing a balding spot the pastor had never seen. Not only that, but he knocked the hats off Dick and Harry, too, standing on the other side of their dying brother. And there, in the dimness of that bedroom, the preacher began to pray over Tom: 'We thank you, Lord, for sending this rattlesnake to bite Tom, for this is the first time in his life that he has admitted that he needs you. And Lord, we pray for two more rattlesnakes to come along and bite Dick and Harry, so that they too might receive this blessing. And then, Lord, we pray for an especially big and ornery cuss of a snake to come along and bite the old man, so that he, too, will know what it means to need you!' Oh, boy! "Emphasis,"

Sept/Nov/Dec., 2009, pg. 69

This rancher's situation and the pastor's prayer were not far off from the conversation Jesus had with his disciples at the temple in Jerusalem. The temple represented a great deal of power in that day. It was the third temple built at that site

and it was huge. It was built by Herod the Great in a power ploy to win over a Jewish population that resented his foreign background and his cooperation with Roman government. Herod began rebuilding the temple block by block in 19 B.C., but he died in 4 B.C., before it was finished. At the time of today's passage from Mark in 27 A.D., it was still not fully completed. "Herod did nothing small-scale, and his renovations of this great edifice were no exception. The platform extending off Mount Moriah's flattened top was buttressed by huge stone walls, and the temple building itself raised to enormous heights, sheathed in gleaming white stone, and crested with gilded metal flames that caught the rising and setting sunlight and set the whole complex ablaze with divine glory. 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!' the disciples rightly exclaimed." But Jesus wasn't quite as impressed. He knew that no human constructs last forever." He knew the temple was really built more for social and political power reasons than to the glory of God. He replied, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." Indeed, only thirty years later the Romans tore it down as they brutally destroyed Jerusalem and the Jewish people in order to teach them a lesson for disobeying Emperors like Caligula. Caligula wanted to place a statute in the temple complex that declared him to be God. Jesus warned the disciples of people to come like Caligula who would claim to be the messiah or God himself. "Emphasis," Sept/Nov/Dec., 2009, pg. 69. TNIBC, Vol. VIII, pg 684.

Even the great temple where God was supposed to dwell looked so indestructible that some people, like the rancher thought they did not need God, all they needed was what they could build themselves. All they thought they needed to do was proclaim themselves, God. Their power base was their self-sufficient persona.

Over my 62 years of life I have seen same power base problems arise in the political, religious and business aspects of our lives. Politicians, religious leaders and entrepreneurs around the world have built "temples," so to speak to themselves, and have claimed to not need God, but to be gods themselves. Adolf Hitler, who was before my time, was one prime example. In every case I have seen so far, these supposedly self-sufficient people and their "temples" have fallen causing great suffering to many others around them, including countless innocent people.

Like the pastor in his prayer to God before the rancher and his family, Jesus was warning the disciples and us about the dangers of making any building, institution, persons, or oneself the base of our power. Jesus' message was one of repentance and turning to God who should be the base of one's power, the foundation of one's life. God is the only one who has the power to sustain us in good times and bad. Our political, religious and business institutions will eventually fail us and lead to tough times around us. God will never fail us. God is the only one who has the power to bring rebirth out of our political, spiritual and financial disasters and give us new life. The preacher in his prayer with the rancher family was also proclaiming what Jesus was teaching. As a world, nation, church and society, we need God not just in tough times, not just when the rattlesnakes bite us, but all of the time to be the base of our power to live and thrive in our political, religious and business world.

Hannah's prayer from I Samuel is a testament to the fact that we also need God to be the power base in our individual lives. Hannah was the second of two wives of a

man named Elkanah. His first wife, Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. Peninnah would harass Hannah for not having children. One can almost hear the torturous words that have might have been spewed out to Hannah. "You must be a terrible sinner Hannah for God to be punishing you by making you barren. God and Elkanah favor me over you. Look at what a mighty woman I am and what a lowly wench you are! You are a loser, Hannah." It did not help the husband, Elkanah, treated Peninnah as his favorite. Hannah as so hurt that she would weep all the time and not eat. Finally, her clueless but concerned husband, Elkanah said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?" He was not for Hannah wanted to bear a child. Hannah was wise in that she knew of herself she was powerless to overcome; her barrenness, her second place in her husband's heart, and the mean spirited venom from the mouth of Peninnah. Hannah had two choices. She could continue to be subjected Peninnah's vicious power, or in her personal anguish and powerlessness turn to God for help. She knew that God had the power to help her and God did. God granted her a son, Samuel whom she dedicated to the Lord. Samuel's name in Hebrew means "that Yahweh hears." God heard all right for Samuel was not only the answer to Hannah's prayer, but he became a great prophet of God to the people of Israel. He cleaned up the corruption in the temple and he anointed David King of Israel. God gave Hannah a new birth, a new life with the gift of the boy, Samuel. That was the power of God at work.

In response to God's power changing her life, Hannah wrote the poem of praise to God and God's power we heard read in the Old Testament Lesson. In our individual lives whom do we turn to change our lives and repower us up when we are so downcast we continually cry and cannot eat; when others try to destroy our sense of self or we feel unfulfilled? Let us be as wise as Hannah was and turn to the Lord God to be the power base in our lives. As Hannah declared, "God raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor." This is what it means to have God as one's power base.

We see the base of God's power at work in the ultimate manner in the passage from Hebrews. Before the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 A.D. the high priest would, as Hebrews declares, stand day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. The sacrifices could not take away sins because the heart of the priest and the people were not in it. It became a powerless ritual without a relationship to God. If we come to church Sunday after Sunday, sing praises to God, confess our sins, are assured of forgiveness, hear the written and spoken word of God, say our prayers, take communion or make vows in a baptism but have no relationship to God in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, then we have become like the priest and his empty sacrifices. There is then no power, no forgiveness, no redemption nor renewal of life in any of this for us.

To change all this emptiness of ritual into a ritual filled with ultimate power, Christ offered his blood, his body, his spirit on the cross for the all time ultimate single sacrifice for our sins. By a single offering he has sanctified us and made us holy before God. This once and for sacrifice by Jesus Christ is the basis for Presbyterians not

having an altar in the sanctuary. We have the communion table where we are reminded of the new covenant where Jesus offers us the most intimate relationship possible to God by the sacrifice of his body and blood. It where God says to us, "This is the covenant that I will make with you after those days: I will put my laws in your hearts, and I will write them on your minds. I will remember your sins and your lawless deeds no more." Because of what Jesus has done for us God's power is effective in building a relationship with us. It is a relationship of faith where the Holy Spirit causes us to confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. It is a relationship of forgiveness, where we forgive each other's sins just as God has forgiven ours. It is a relationship of reconciliation where God accepts us just as we are and we accept others in the same manner. It is a relationship where we encourage each other to remain faithful to our Lord in good and bad times for he is always faithful to us. It is a relationship where we encourage each other to put our faith in action by sharing the good news; by generously and sacrificially giving of our tithes, talents and time; by feeding the hungry, giving shelter to the homeless and so much more. This my friends is the power base of God that empowers our lives so that when we sing praises to God, confess our sins, are assured of forgiveness, hear the written and spoken word of God, say our prayers, take communion or make vows in a baptism, we mean it. This is the power and relationships that invite and excite us to come to worship the Lord on Sunday and nurture us to also worship him every other day of the week in word and deed.

Power has become an important and unfortunately divisive issue in our day. It does not have to be divisive if we admit we need God, and make our power base God in Jesus Christ.