

“Mighty God”
Isaiah 11:1-9; Matthew 11:2-11
December 9, 2018

We’ve heard it constantly throughout history. When the ancient Egyptians marched into war against the Babylonians, they marched under the banner of their god Isis, while the Babylonians marched under their god, Marduk. My god is bigger, greater, mightier than your god.

Thousands of years later, when all Europe worshiped the same God, each nation, each people, still tried to claim the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob for themselves. In the Great War - the War to End all Wars - every German soldier had engraved on the belt buckle of his uniform the words Gott mit Uns - God with us, which is the translation of the Hebrew expression, Emmanuel. Thus German victory was equated with the divine will. And those who fought against the Germans - or alongside them - were really no different.

All of Christendom prays “for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory.” One of our most beloved hymns, Holy, Holy, Holy references “Lord God Almighty.” Our Bible and our faith both speak of God in terms of might. But how that might is used, to what ends it is put, is what humanity often seems hopelessly confused about.

John the Baptist had some very definite ideas about the power and the might of the Messiah - who just happened to be his cousin. But John got a little confused.

If you remember, John was one of the first, indeed THE first, to recognize in Jesus the divine nature of his mission. It was the baptism by John that began Christ’s ministry. It was in that scene at the Jordan River that John realized that

Christ had no need of the baptism of repentance that John was preaching, and begged instead that Christ baptize him. It was John whose voice was crying in the wilderness, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord." It was John who first proclaimed to the crowds, "Behold the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world."

John saw. John understood. John knew that in Jesus the ancient prophecies were being fulfilled. And he shouted it from the rooftops, that the One who had been foretold from age to age had now come.

But John, like so many of the rest of us, sometimes got a bit confused. At one moment, John saw clearly. The next, his vision was clouded. And it's not because John was a weak man, a bad man, or unjust. As we know, Jesus himself said that John was the greatest man who ever lived - quite a testimonial that a lot of us wouldn't mind receiving. And yet, John was mistaken about some of the things Jesus had come to say and do.

John knew that the coming Messiah would have power and might at his disposal, power and might that was almost unimaginable. John also saw around him great evils, unimaginable sin, degradation, corruption, lust, oppression, thievery, murder. A society stood condemned in the eyes of its Lord.

And so John put two and two together. And like many of the prophets of old, John became a messenger of woe and doom. The axe is at the root of the tree, he cried out. The divine fire is coming down from above to burn and consume and purify all in its path. Repent! For only a few will be saved from the wrath of an angry God.

According to John, he whom we know as the Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world was also to be the instrument of divine vengeance. According to John, he who came humbly for baptism at the hands of a sinner was

also someone who would use divine power to relentlessly pursue and punish all sinners.

John was on the right track, but he made the wrong judgment, coming to the wrong conclusion. John had the right idea, the right heart, and even the right man. But he put the pieces together incorrectly. For John, the prophecy of the coming of the Mighty God somehow got turned around into one of those childish fighting matches. So John condemned Herod for his sins, saying that Herod served served Satan. True enough. But John taunted Herod the King by saying, My Lamb of God is stronger than your Prince of Darkness, and he's gonna beat you up!

Anyone who looks to God that way is sure to be disappointed. There IS divine power. There IS might. There IS strength. But it is not to be used to our own foolish ends and ways of thinking.

The soldiers at the crucifixion of Christ made the same mistake. "If you are the Son of God," they mocked Jesus, "then come down from the Cross and save yourself." But that is not what miracles are for; that is not what divine purpose allows.

Maybe our idea of the God which we think we see in the Old Testament IS a God of power and vengeance: an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. But as the Apostle Paul reminds us, there is "a more excellent way" - the way of Love.

That is how divine strength is to be shown. That is what divine might now means. Not that we are to lose our backbone, not that we are to cower in the face of brute strength, not that we are to lose hope in the face of a world that sometimes seems so full of evil - and indifference - that nothing but divine might exercised from on high can save the day.

Because the power to work wonders has been promised to all who have faith. Might is not there to exercise vengeance, strength is not provided to us to make or prove personal points. God is not interested in whose daddy can beat up who else's daddy. Rather, the full force of God's might will be shown in that day when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Christ is Lord - not because our will has been bent by force, but because the love of Christ lives within us all.

Let us pray: