

**Pentecost 8, Year B**  
**July 15, 2018**  
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Abraham Lincoln once said, **“Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man’s character, give him power.”** Today we engage with two texts from the Bible that show us what it looks like when men are given power, and when the limits of their power are tested. In the reading from Second Samuel we hear of King David, the man who was chosen by God as a young shepherd to lead the people of God in place of their first king, Saul. Saul had become too confident in his own power as king and God was not pleased. So for a while, there were two men who could lay claim to being king. It took years and the death of Saul for David to be acknowledged as King of all Israel and Judah. Once he ruled both the northern and southern kingdoms, David began consolidating power. A huge house of cedar was built for him. His first wife was Michal, the younger daughter of his rival Saul, later he took two more wives, and the text tells us **“David took more concubines and wives; and more sons and daughters were born to David.”** Then David decided to reclaim the Ark of the Covenant, which had been captured and then abandoned by the Philistines. It held the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments and had been a visible sign of their relationship with God as God’s people had wandered through the wilderness. To bring the Ark of the Covenant of God to the middle of the city of David would be

to place the tangible sign of God's Presence in the center of God's people once again. It seemed an excellent idea. David led the rejoicing as the procession made its way slowly toward the city. But then, just as all seemed to be going smoothly, the Ark was jostled on its cart, and a man reached down and touched it and was instantly struck dead. That will stop a parade in its tracks. It was a sudden reminder that the power of God's Ark was not something to be manipulated for human gain; it was something that belonged to God alone. So David left the Ark where it was for several months and the people among whom it rested received great blessings. He decided to try moving it again. David's joy could not be contained. The Bible tells us: **“David danced before the LORD with all his might....”** Throughout the procession David acted as both king and priest: sacrificing, blessing, and pitching the tent for the Ark to rest in as it had during the time God's people wandered in the wilderness. On the surface all seemed well, but there are signs to which we should pay attention. First, the Ark is a symbol of the power and presence of God. Neither should be underestimated or taken for granted. Second, David's wife Michal was his first wife, and she loved him. Her change of heart came after David took other wives and concubines, became more and more powerful, and became the center of attention functioning as king, priest, and barely clothed dancer before the people. This is the same king whose eye for

yet another lovely lady would lead to his eventual downfall through his abuse of power.

In the Gospel reading it is another king whose eye for a lovely lady or two would lead to his abuse of power. King Herod was the son of the infamous King Herod, who had all the baby boys killed in order to eliminate the potential threat from Jesus, the “**newborn King of the Jews.**” He was one of three men named King Herod who ruled over the former kingdom of their father. The names are confusing and remind me of George Foreman, former Olympic Gold medalist and Heavyweight boxing champion, whose five sons are all named—you guessed it—George Foreman. The three King Herods served at the pleasure of Caesar Gaius Caligula, the Emperor of Rome. King Herod had also had a first wife, but he became smitten with his brother’s wife Herodias, who was also his niece, and the two of them decided to defy the Law of God, along with prevailing social norms, and leave their original spouses in order to marry each other. John the Baptist condemned the relationship. John spoke against their marriage with his customary forthrightness, which intrigued Herod and enraged Herodias. Herod balanced the public shaming, his own fascination with John, and his wife’s anger by having John arrested and imprisoned. Until that is, the fateful day when Herod was a little too enthusiastic about his stepdaughter’s dancing at his birthday party and promised her anything she wanted. The trouble with such an open, public vow was

that when she returned with her mother's request, Herod had left himself without a respectable way out. So there he was, the man who theoretically had all the power, yet he dared not face down the consequences of saying no. In order to preserve peace and save face, Herod knowingly ordered an innocent man to be killed.

Michal foreshadowed King David's ultimate downfall through his abuse of power.

This flashback story shows us Herod's lack of courage and foreshadows Jesus' death under similar circumstances at the hands of Pontius Pilate. As Abraham Lincoln said, power showed the true character of these men.

These readings may leave us wondering, however, what it is we are to make of God's power. God chose and empowered Saul to be king, then rejected Saul when he did not listen and chose David. God showed patience with David that was not given to Saul. God encouraged David to move the Ark, yet struck down a man who reached out a hand to steady it, terrifying everyone. Then God showered blessings upon those who tended the Ark. God allowed men like Herod and Pilate to be rulers, and they ordered the slaughter of God's prophet John and the crucifixion of Jesus. God is mysterious enough to move in and among us in wind and wisdom and still small voices, to create the universe and part the waters of the Red Sea to free people from slavery, and to become Incarnate by being born of Mary. God was also human enough in Jesus to eat and drink with sinners, call disciples, heal the sick, teach multitudes, raise the dead, and weep at the grave of

his friend Lazarus. God is beyond our comprehension— but not beyond our belief, our wonder, our experience, our love. If we were to meditate upon the power of infinite love, then we might just grasp a glimmer of the power of God, for God is Love. As Presiding Bishop Michael Curry declared at the Royal Wedding: **“There’s power in love. Don’t underestimate it.”** If you have seen, felt, or known the power pure love has in this life, then knowing that God is the eternal source of Love can evoke hope, awe, gratitude, or amazement. What we are called to do is to be open to the astounding love and power of God, never knowing how or in whom we might encounter it. I leave you with the thought provoking words of American author Annie Dillard:

**Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? ... It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.**

Pay attention. You never know.

Amen