

POWER AND FEAR

Scriptures: Mark 6:14-29; Isaiah 43:1-7

In today's scripture there is an interesting interplay between power and fear. Obviously, Herod has all the power. He is a king, for heaven's sake. When he throws a birthday party for himself, all the prominent celebrities of Galilee are invited: army commanders, government officials, entertainers. The guests are treated to lavish food, fine wine, and hot women. King Herod is the Donald Trump of ancient Galilee. John the Baptist, by contrast, is a penniless prophet who languishes in Herod's prison until he is executed. But look at who lives in fear. Verse 16: "But when Herod heard of [Jesus], he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." Is that paranoid, or what? Even after killing John, Herod is still afraid of him.

It appears that Herod is also afraid of his wife. Verse 17: "For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her." Herod divorced his first wife in order to marry Herodias, who happened to be his brother's wife. It is the ancient Middle Eastern version of *Desperate Housewives*. John the Baptist denounced them for committing adultery, and Herodias took offense. She demanded that Herod throw John in jail, which he did just to satisfy his wife. He was afraid of her. But he would not put John to death because he was also afraid of John. Verse 20 says, "For Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man."

Then came the birthday party. Herod wanted Herodias' daughter to dance for him. As incentive, he offered to give her anything she wanted. So she performed the dance, and then asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. I asked Joe Bruce, our children's ministry director, if there was a flannel graph version of this story. He said no, not even *Veggie Tales*.

Now here is the interesting part of the story. Herod had kept John alive because he was afraid of him. But now he agrees to execute him because he is afraid of his guests. Verse 26: "The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and the guests, he did not want to refuse her." Herod has all the power, but his actions are manipulated by everyone else. He arrests John because he is afraid of his wife; he protects him because he is afraid of John, and executes him because he is afraid of his guests.

Having power does not protect you from fear. If anything, it makes it worse, because if you have power you have a lot to lose.

Toward the end of the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, there is a scene where Simon Legree, the slave owner, orders Tom, one of his slaves, to beat another slave into submission. But Tom refuses. He says, "I'm willing to work night and day, and work while there's life and breath in me; but this yer thing I can't feel it right to do; and, Mas'r, I *never* shall do it,--*never!*"

Legree says, "What! ye blasted black beast! tell *me* ye don't think it *right* to do what I tell ye! What have any of you cussed cattle to do with thinking what's right? ... Ain't I yer master? Didn't I pay down twelve hundred dollars, cash, for all there is inside yer old cussed black shell? An't yer mine, now, body and soul?" he said, giving Tom a violent kick with his heavy boot.

“No! no! no! my soul ain’t yours, Mas’r!” said Tom. “You haven’t bought it,--ye can’t buy it! It’s been bought and paid for, by the one that is able to keep it;--no matter, no matter, you can’t harm me!” “I can’t!” said Legree with a sneer; “we’ll see,--we’ll see!” And Legree orders two of his slave drivers to beat Tom into unconsciousness (pp. 386-387).

But that night Simon Legree can’t sleep. He remembers his compassionate and devout mother who was abused by his violent oppressive father. Harriet Stowe writes, “He would have been ashamed to tell of it, but large drops of sweat stood on his forehead, his heart beat heavy and thick with fear; he even thought he saw something white rising and glimmering in the gloom before him, and shuddered to think what if the form of his dead mother should suddenly appear to him” (p. 405). Remember what King Herod thought: “It is John, risen from the dead.”

The next day Legree finds Tom and says, “Now, Tom, get right down on yer knees and beg my pardon.” Tom did not move. “Down, you dog!” said Legree, striking him with his riding whip. “Mas’r Legree,” said Tom, “I can’t do it. I did only what I thought was right. I shall do just so again, if ever the time comes. I never will do a cruel thing, come what may.”

“Yes, but ye don’t know what may come, Master Tom. Ye think what you’ve got is something. I tell you t’an’t anything,--nothing ‘t all. How would you like to be tied to a tree, and have a slow fire lit up around ye,--wouldn’t that be pleasant,--eh, Tom?”

“Mas’r,” said Tom, “I know ye can do dreadful things, but”—he stretched himself upward and clasped his hands,--“but, after ye’ve killed the body, there an’t no more ye can do. And oh, there’s all ETERNITY to come, after that!”

Harriet Stowe writes, “ETERNITY,--the word thrilled through the black man’s soul with light and power, as he spoke; it thrilled through the sinner’s soul, too, like the bite of a scorpion” (pp. 411-412).

Power and fear. There is a strange relationship between the two. Simon Legree, like King Herod, has all the power; but he’s the one who is afraid. Tom, the powerless slave, has no fear. Why? Because he belongs body and soul in life and in death to a Savior who is more powerful, more faithful, and more eternal than Simon Legree.

On the back of the bulletin I have collected a sample of verses from the Bible in which God’s people are told not to be afraid. If you read through the list, you will notice they all have one thing in common. They are all addressed to people in trouble. Every one of them. When Hagar and her young child face starvation in the wilderness, God says, “Do not be afraid.” When the people of Israel face Pharaoh’s chariots with their backs to the Red Sea, Moses says, “Do not be afraid.” When Israel is attacked by a powerful alliance of enemies, God says, “Do not fear.” Even after the people of Israel are defeated by their enemies and taken into exile, God says, “Do not fear, for I am with you.”

God does not promise we will be spared from frightening circumstances. John the Baptist was executed. Jesus died on a cross, and so did some of his followers. Tom later died at the hands of Simon Legree. Christians do not believe that everything will go well for us. We

believe that nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ. It is not power that gives us courage but faith.

One last story. In 1984 Ben Weir, a Presbyterian missionary, was kidnapped and taken hostage by Shiite extremists in Lebanon. He later wrote a book about this experience called *Hostage Bound, Hostage Free*. Here is how he described what happened on the day of his kidnapping:

I tried to resist, but the man was much younger and stronger than I was. He twisted my necktie and pulled me toward the car. I braced my hands on both sides of the open back door, but he gave me a tremendous shove from behind and forced me into the back seat. A man with a black beard jumped into the front passenger seat and pointed an automatic pistol at my head while the driver put the car in motion. The man who had seized me forced me down on the floor of the car and pulled a sack over me, keeping his hand on my back. By now the car was speeding along. I realized I was at the mercy of my assailants, helpless, unable to escape.

Frightening thoughts raced through my mind. What was going to happen to me? Would I be killed? Would I be held for ransom? Tortured? And why me? Did they want someone else and take me by mistake? I felt completely powerless, like so many hundreds of Lebanese who have themselves been captured and taken away. I had read about such kidnappings frequently and had talked to distraught relatives of the kidnap victims many times. Well, I said to myself, now it is happening to me. It's not a story in the paper, it's for real. This is a new experience. Now I'll know what it's like to be kidnapped.

Despite this mental pep talk, I couldn't help worrying: Here I am, a gun at my head, unable to do anything for myself. I can't get free. I can't even call out for help. I don't know what lies ahead. I may be hurt, even killed. Yet I was guided by a deep assurance. I felt supported, cradled, in the dependable arms of God. He knew where I was. He knew the men who had me in their control. He was aware of where the car was going and what lay ahead. I could count on God. So in spite of my anxiety and fear, I began to relax (p. 13).

There is a strange relationship between power and fear. More power does not mean less fear. The remedy for fear is not power but faith, not intimidation but righteousness, not control but commitment to the triumph of God's love.

- Ken Onstot
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