

**"Political Power and God's Power"**  
**Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent**  
**Lectionary Year C**  
**December 6, 2009**  
**Texts: Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6**  
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I gained an understanding of the basic nature of political power firsthand, from my own political campaigns. My first foray into politics came in the spring of 1967, when I ran for student body president of Gainesville High School. My chief political advisor was none other than Dave Tanner. I lost the race, but not because of anything Dave did or failed to do; he was enormously helpful to my campaign. I lost because a third-party candidate entered the race and took more of the votes away from me than I had counted on than he did from my chief opponent.

I thought I was going to be running only against Sparky Flint, a football player, whom we knew would be able to claim the votes of all the jocks, the cheerleaders, and most of the drill team. The red states, as it were. My campaign was counting on gaining the support of the band, the choirs, the honor society, and of course, the nerds and geeks. The blue states, as it were. But once Larry Taylor entered the race, a giant sucking sound could be heard through the halls of GHS, as the majority of nerds and geeks turned out to be independents and

sided with him, which was somewhat understandable given the fact that he was an even greater nerd than I was. There was nothing Dave nor I could do about it. So I spent my senior year as the chair of the Religious Affairs Committee of the Student Council, a sort preview of what would become my eventual career.

My second political venture took place about seventeen years later after I had moved back to Gainesville to work in the family business. In my hometown, you could not get elected to public office unless you received the support of the Powell family, particularly the late Dr. Bill Powell and his wife, Joann. Dr. Powell was a family practice physician in Gainesville, and by the time I returned to the city, he had been taking care of people for over forty years. Needless to say, he knew nearly everyone in town, and when he asked someone to vote a certain way, the person being asked probably could think of several times Dr. Powell had done something special for him or her. You can call in a lot of favors after forty years of practicing medicine in a small town.

The Powells got involved in local politics when their own children started to school, and their particular interest initially was the school board. Their son, Dick, a dentist in Gainesville now, was in Dave's grade, so all the time we were in school growing up, the Powells were running the school system politically, supposedly for the sake of their

children. Eventually they established a political power base that carried over into city council elections, hospital board elections, congressional elections, and what I came to be interested in, the Board of Trustees of what is now North Central Texas College, the junior college in Gainesville.

I was asked to run for the board by the faculty of the school, because they were having a difficult time with the administration and wanted to see some changes made that would benefit not only the faculty but the entire school as well. The administration had created an adversarial relationship with the faculty, never a good idea in an institution of higher learning. So I agreed to run because I thought the faculty was right and wanted to help them in their cause. The first thing I did was to go talk to the Powells, to "kiss the ring," so to speak. My family and the Powells had been personal friends for years, Dick and Dave and I were all in band and choir together in high school, and the Powells had supported my father when he ran for both the school board and the college board.

I knew from my own experience that the Powells had the power to get things done. After moving back to Gainesville, I decided to buy the house that was practically next door to Dick's. It was a turn-of-the-century farmhouse style home in the historic district, and I wanted it desperately. I submitted a contract on it, but not before another one

had been given to the owners by another couple, the Finleys. They simply were waiting for their loan to be approved at First Texas Savings. It looked like I was not going to get the house, and I shared my disappointment with Dick, with whom I was serving at the time on the Heart Association Board. He said to me, "Before you give up on the house completely, let me talk to my dad about it. He's on the board at First Texas. Maybe there is something he can do."

Two days later I got a call at work. The voice on the other end of the line was that of Bob Welch, the local manager of First Texas Savings and a fellow Rotarian. He said to me, "Dr. Powell wanted me to call you personally and tell you that the Finleys were turned down for their loan. It looks like you're going to get your house after all." I was thrilled, of course, but that incident should have sent up a big red flag for me. It didn't.

Anyway, the Powells agreed to support me in the college board election, and even though I was the youngest candidate ever to run for the position, I won the county-wide race rather handily. It also helped that my family had been in Cooke County since the early 1800s. The campaign was a tough one, though, full of dirty tricks by the other side and strategic counter-maneuvers by my side. As difficult as the race was, however, it was a picnic compared to serving on the board. I have some great stories about the battles that were fought there.

My real education into how politics work, however, came on my very first night to meet with the board. Ten minutes before the meeting was to begin and before I even was sworn in as a new board member, Dr. Powell himself called out to the college and asked to speak to me. When I got on the phone, he told me that we were to vote that night on whether or not to keep the tennis program at the college. He instructed me that his family had a vested interest in that program and that he would appreciate it a great deal if I would vote to keep it.

The light suddenly came on for me. I understood in that moment what politicians down through the centuries have had to learn, that is, that you are not simply elected to any public office in order to accomplish what *you* think is right and what *you* want to do; you are elected to accomplish what those who have backed you think is right and want to do. In that moment I personally felt the awesome nature and force of political power, and I was overwhelmed.

Of course I did what Dr. Powell asked me to do, and in so doing I became simply another pawn on the Powell's political chessboard. Fortunately I didn't have a real problem voting the way he wanted me to, though it was inconsistent with my general attitude toward athletics at the junior college level. However it taught me a most-needed lesson on what is expected of people in political office by those who work to get them elected.

So what does all this talk of politics and power have to do with Advent? We are supposed to be talking about Jesus, aren't we? You are quite right. But look again at our Gospel lesson for today and see if you can figure out why it might be appropriate to refer to political power with respect to this passage of scripture.

Jesus was born into a political situation, and he died a political death. *Politics killed Jesus*, but his resurrection by God vindicated his death and showed dramatically that God has more power than any political institution, including Rome, the most extensive and powerful political empire in history, past or present.

In this passage, Luke is setting the stage for what will come, and the way this story is framed is almost funny and certainly ironic. He names all the important people—all the people of position, influence, prestige, and power—and then Luke says that the word of the Lord came to John, a nobody out in the middle of nowhere. Did the word of the Lord come to the political powers of secular government? No. Did the word of God come to the political powers of religious government? No. It came to John, the herald of God's word that was promised to Malachi. *The word of the Lord always comes to those whom God elects to receive the power of that word and not necessarily to those whom the world might elect to positions of power.*

The reason that God's word more often than not in the Bible comes to the powerless rather than to the politically powerful may be that *God's power is so completely different from political power*. God's power has nothing to do with getting someone elected so you can call that person up and get him or her to cast a vote in a way that will benefit you. God's power is not the power of manipulation, pressure, influence, domination, control, and all the other ways political power works. God's power has to do with suffering love and a cross, just the opposite of political power.

And because God's power is so different from political power, in the Gospel story God's word doesn't come through those persons with political power of any kind, but instead it comes through those persons who eventually die at the hands of political power, namely John, who was beheaded by Herod Antipas, and Jesus, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate. Real power is God's power—the power of pure, unbounded love; the power of authentic personhood and genuine community—not the personal power of politics.

The political satirist, P. J. O'Rourke, once said that "the whole idea of government is this: If enough people get together and act in concert, they can take something and not pay for it" [*Parliament of Whores*, p. 232]. Maybe this understanding of the nature of political power is what makes it so far removed from God's power. For in Christ,

God has demonstrated his power, but *it is not the kind of power that takes without paying*. Jesus' whole life—his birth, his ministry, and his death on a cross—shows us that God's power is the kind of power that gives and gives and gives and does so at enormous cost. It is for the demonstration of this power and no other that we wait with eager anticipation in this season of Advent.