

“God’s Power and Our Imagination”
January 28, 2024

Philippians 4:4-14
Ephesians 3:14-21

Hear again those astonishing words in the letter to the Ephesians: “God, by the power at work within us, is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.”

These words came back to me again and again in the past year. This, I think, is the reality that we have discovered together as we moved through a year of rebuilding and renewal, experiencing new strength and growth. This is the reality we are called to live out during the year ahead as we will no doubt encounter new possibilities and opportunities.

These words speak of God’s power and our imagination. They accurately picture what we have come to know about the ability of the living God in our midst: “God, by the power at work within us, is able to accomplish far more than all we can ask or imagine.”

We are invited to imagine new ways of living.

We are offered new strength for living.

We are reminded that there is a power at work within us.

The Greek word for “power” is *dunamis*, from which the English words “dynamic” and “dynamite” both come.

Power is the *ability to act*. And each one of us has that ability to act for the good of one another, for the good of our neighbors, for the good of the world.

The power in the universe wants to do more. More even than feeding the hungry and sheltering the homeless—as important and needed as those actions are. This power wants justice to roll down like fountains and righteousness like streams.

That power is working through you.

That power is working through this congregation.

Like all power, it is somewhat frightening. Because this is “holy power” it borders on the terrifying. But it also speaks to us of great possibilities.

What is this power? It is nothing less than the power of love.

The power of love—the ability to act for the benefit not only of oneself but also of others—the power of love is nothing less than the strength of God acting through us.

Today’s annual meeting of our congregation allows us to open our eyes and our hearts and see just how that power and strength is being made known among us and through us. We look back and we look ahead. We can see where we have been and where we are going—and this year we can rejoice and give thanks for both our past and our future.

Now, we will, of course, talk this morning about M&M's. You know: *Money* and *Members*. And, actually, we're doing pretty well by those measurements.

Consider money.

The Trustees, who do a great job of keeping track of the money that comes in and the money that goes out, were a little concerned last year. OK—Maybe at times they were *really* concerned. We started out with a projected financial shortfall that was, well, *significant*. But we ended with surplus! Our Stewardship Board is calling 2024 the “Year of Living Generously”—and many of you got a head start on that in 2023.

So along with the Trustees and the Stewardship Board and all of our leadership, I want to thank you for your giving. Your giving funds our programs of Christian education and music. It keeps our building in good repair. And your giving touches the lives of people around the world through our mission spending. Thanks again for being a generous congregation.

And consider members.

People keep finding us and staying around and affirming the covenant of our congregation as official members. What a joy it has been to welcome 14 new members and to see even more new people among us in these days. With strong programs of Christian education and music, vital worship, warm and welcoming people, and a strong and faithful presence in this community, our congregation attracts people. We see a growing number of university students worshipping with us, along with a growing number of young adults and a growing number of older adults—all discovering a place of welcome and acceptance, support and challenge.

So, thanks again for being a great congregation!

Money and Membership—we're doing well with both. And that is really something to celebrate. This is not the case for the large majority of mainline Protestant churches—especially over the past four years.

It's not that we go out in search of members and money. The members of this congregation and the financial resources that we have are the fruit of a congregation that seeks to be faithful to God in our belief and our doubts; a congregation that seeks to show God's love in our community and in the larger world; a congregation that seeks to welcome all people.

None of this is necessarily easy nor to be expected. It is right that we should give thanks when we see such signs of health in our congregation. It is really something to celebrate. So let's rejoice and give thanks to God for the good and different thing that is happening here.

There is more, however—more than we could ask or imagine.

The psalmist gives us a powerful image of a good tree, planted by the water, yielding good fruit in season. A congregation planted by the water, a congregation that is nurtured by worship and prayer and action in the world will be fruitful in good times and bad. Such a congregation has a reservoir of strength and hope to draw on when resources are scarce.

So, Paul can write to the Philippians: “Rejoice in the Lord always.” This is not a call to be glad when the sun is shining and the birds are singing. “Always.” Rejoice always. Paul said that he

has “learned the secret of being well-fed and being hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.” That is to say, he is like a tree planted by water.

Paul made a lot of lists. To the Philippians he gave a list of things to think about: whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, if there is any excellence or anything worthy of praise. Now, it’s said that there’s nothing especially “Christian” about any of the items on this list. But Paul wants his readers to mull over these qualities, to give them consideration, and see how they might take shape in their lives, in our lives.

Then he concludes: After all that thinking, “Keep on doing the things you have learned and received and heard and seen.” That is: just do it.

We discover here the roots of our Congregational emphasis on covenant rather than creed. What we *think* and what we think *about* are important. What matters even more is how we live with each other.

The fruit of our congregation is shown not so much in our money and members as in our ministry and mission. The joy of discipleship is gained through, as one person said, “sitting with the dying, loving the unlovable, feeding the sheep.”ⁱ

Of course, there’s a lot of what I call the “left-hand-not-knowing-what-the-right-hand-is-doing” activity as well: Members visiting others who are sick, shut-in, or in nursing homes, financial giving that supports mission work around the globe, comforting those who mourn, living as people of faith at work, at home, and in the community. A lot of the ministry of our members happens in secret and yet makes so much difference to individual lives and to the life of the world.

Keep on doing the things you have learned...

We aren’t involved in this city because we have a little extra time and energy and money. These are not activities we engage in because we’re good people looking for a good cause.

Our ministry and mission are our witness to the love of God made known in Jesus Christ.

They are central to who we are as the people of God.

If we fail here, we fail to be a church—regardless of how much money and how many members we have.

All of that we do is important and vitally needed. Still, I would not suggest for a minute that we attempt to do any of these things if it were not for a sure sense of God’s strength and power increasing in us.

And this is the good news we hear today: There is no limit to God’s resources.

Paul writes about the “riches of God’s glory.” Think about that: more than we could ask or imagine.

And even more, God is not done with us—as individuals or a congregation. All that we can ask or imagine is small stuff compared to the new and surprising things that will occur as the power of God continues to work in us and among us and through us.

It has been said that not one church in one hundred has any notions of its power. This is a special place, however. I think that we can become one of less than 1% of churches as we discover the power within us and among us.

It is nothing less than the power of the living God.

ⁱ Elizabeth Nordbeck, “Reaping the Legacies of the Past,” in *Beginning Your Ministry*.