



God's Power Stirred Up
December 13, 2020: The Sixth Sunday of Advent
The Rev. Nicholas M. Morris-Kliment
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

May the words of my mouth, and the mediations of all our hearts, be always acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I'm going to call an audible this morning, and take my inspiration from a collect, or prayer, that's not in your worship bulletin. But it's one that many of you may know. It's the collect for the 3rd Sunday in the four Sunday Advent we've used in years past. This collect is a little bit distinctive and takes me in the direction I'd like to go this morning. So here it is, and thank you Kim Rocco for putting it in the chat:

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Book of Common Prayer, p. 212

Collects are a particular form of Anglican prayer, with a distinctive structure. That structure pulls together, or collects, attributes of God, insights from our human condition, and what we desire from God. The collect weaves these elements into a tapestry suggesting themes both for preaching on a Sunday, and for our on-going personal reflection and transformation. So, this collect names God's power; names our struggle with sin; and names our yearning for God's grace.

The Collect dates to the 8th century in what is now northern France. It comes from a time when Frankish kings had names like Chlotar, Dagobert, and Pippin the Short. The Collect, in Latin, crossed the English Channel into England. During the English Reformation, Thomas Cranmer, architect of our first *Book of Common Prayer* in 1549, made sure all worship in the Church of England was translated from Latin into English, so the common people could understand it.

The Latin word *excita*, which originally began our Collect today, was translated into English as "stir up." This Collect was originally used before Advent began. And it touches on the themes of longing and expectation that characterize the upcoming season.

But here's where it gets interesting for Anglophiles. Apparently, in addition to its theological function as a plea for God's power, the phrase "stir up" also served a culinary function: it reminded English cooks to get busy with their Christmas puddings. Apparently, a good Christmas pudding took weeks to mature into the proper consistency and flavor, so best to begin stirring things up a good 4 to 5 weeks before Christmas.

But you'll notice that the collect does not actually say, "Stir up your pudding, oh Lord," but, "Stir up your power."

What does this mean?



God's Power Stirred Up

December 13, 2020: The Sixth Sunday of Advent

The Rev. Nicholas M. Morris-Kliment

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

The prayer acknowledges our human limitations. Sin causes us to stumble over our best efforts. And so the prayer voices our yearning for God's help to make things right. We need God's merciful, graceful power, to help and deliver us.

John the Baptist is God's choice to prepare us for that kind of power.

We met John last week in the Gospel of Mark. He emerged from the wilderness in a scratchy fur and leather outfit, following a bugs and honey diet. He called people to self-examination and repentance, and forgiveness of sins. In the Gospel of Matthew, John's language is a rather salty, and not calibrated for success with people in high places. He calls an important group of religious leaders "a brood of vipers." He says that he baptizes with water, but that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, and that fire will be really hot. In Luke's Gospel, John's candor with King Herod costs him his head.

Perhaps merciful and graceful John is not. But at stirring up the way for God's power, John was made for the task.

In John's Gospel this morning, the piety brigade comes out from Jerusalem to Bethany, to see who this John is for themselves. John is remarkably circumspect, even terse, in response to their questions. "I am not the Messiah." "I am not." "No." He consistently points away from himself, to Jesus. He says, "I am making straight the way of the Lord. Even though you don't know who he is, he is among you, and I am not worthy to tie his shoes. I've wondered if at this point, John even knows exactly who or where Jesus is.

The prayer that I've shared is addressed to God the Father, though it is God the Son whom we await this season. The kind of power we pray for, God's merciful and graceful power, comes through Jesus.

According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus gives his first sermon in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. His text is from Isaiah 61, the same Bible passage from the Hebrew Bible that Annie read for us this morning. Here we get a clear sense of God's power, and the kind of behavior and influence that those who act in Christ's name must display: God's power brings good news to the oppressed; binds up the broken hearted; proclaims liberty to the captives; release to the prisoners; and comforts those who mourn. God's power brings gladness and praise. God's power brings repair and justice and restoration.

While we have much for which to be grateful, it's true that there is also much to be concerned about, obviously, in our own homes, in our communities, the nation, and the world. Right now, the overriding concern is the pandemic, and not only the suffering and death that it is causing, but the suffering that it is revealing, suffering that was already there—especially among poor and marginalized peoples, and people of color. People who have been overpowered. We see the specter of exploitation among essential workers, often unseen, taken for granted. We don't have to look too far for the abuse of power—whether at the highest levels in our land, or in local law enforcement.



God's Power Stirred Up

December 13, 2020: The Sixth Sunday of Advent

The Rev. Nicholas M. Morris-Kliment

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

The devastating effects of this kind of power can call into question the nature of God's power. If God is all-powerful and all-good—and that is a classic understanding of God—why doesn't God use God's power to stop heinous deeds of cruelty? Why is God sitting on God's hands and letting all these catastrophes occur?

I lean on a wonderful essay by a writer named Debi Thomas in this exploration of power.

Perhaps we project our own broken human understanding of power onto God. Human power so often means imposing our wills on others, holding and withholding favors in order to further our own interests. For human beings, power means being in control.

What if God's power is different? A God that is in control may be more convenient for us—a God like that makes fewer demands. If everything that happens or doesn't happen is God's will, then why work for justice, why strive to end suffering, why lean into hard conversations with people who are different?

The kind of power God is stirring up for us while we wait in Advent comes very differently. The power of God that is stirred up is the power to be present in all of our messy humanity. After all, why would our God choose to enter the world as a homeless child born to a teenaged girl? As far as we know, Jesus never carried a weapon, had a throne, or owned slaves. As far as we know, he never got married, or had children, or owned land.

Instead of all these typical signs of power, our God chose to be powerful by being present—in our pains as much as our joys, in our sorrows as much as our ecstasies, in our messes as much as our orders, neither flinching nor running away, but joining us at the center of wherever we are in the adventure of being human.

Wherever we find ourselves offering good news to the oppressed; binding up the broken hearted; proclaiming liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners; comforting those who mourn; offering gladness and praise, repair and justice and restoration...then we can know that we are present with Jesus and his power. That is the power that we need, to be present to one another and the world as Jesus is present.

Let us pray:

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and forever.

Amen.