



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 I Am About to Do a  
New Thing  
(*Prophetic Ethics*, pp. 16-  
23)

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### Christian Reflection

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# I Am About to Do a New Thing

The kaleidoscopic portrait of God's power in the prophetic texts both comforts and confuses us. Some passages shock us with their brutality. Yet in the prophetic tradition there is a compelling vision of power that can transform the whole of creation, if only we have eyes to see and minds to perceive it.

## Prayer

Scripture Reading: Micah 4:1-4

## Reflection

As Israel developed as a nation state in the tenth century B.C., after the reign of King David, the locus of power shifted away from village community leaders—elders, judges, priests, and prophets—to the king who ruled over the people. At the same time, Israel's language about power and God began to change. "'Dominion,' which once was associated with *keeping, tilling, and caring* in the creation accounts (Genesis 1-2; Psalms 104:1-30), took on new nuances of *power over, domination, and control*, especially as social classes and economic strata emerged in Israelite society and as kings abused royal power," Dempsey writes. "For many Israelites, God became associated with the ruling male hierarchy of the day; the understanding of God and God's power became likened to the king and the king's power."

Some prophets present God as a powerful and dominating king. Others critique this view and the royal theology from which it flows; they discover that the divine power is expressed in restoration and liberation, and even in non-violence.

- ▶ *Power and domination* (Amos 1:3-2:16). A "royal theology" echoes through the writings of the eighth-century prophets. "Their God exercised justice and sovereignty 'over all,' in the hierarchical manner of their later kings' *domination* instead of the *dominion* associated with the creator God and King David," observes Dempsey. In Amos 1:3-2:16, for instance, though divine power is directed against injustice (land-grabbing warfare, slave trading, exploitation of the poor, and desecration), the text portrays God as exercising power punitively and violently. God's power appears to be "similar to, but greater than any power on earth. It presents a vision of divine power being used to dominate others for the sake of ensuring future justice."
- ▶ *Power, restoration, and liberation* (Jeremiah 50:17-20). Jeremiah comforts the northern kingdom Israel, which had been conquered by the Assyrians around 721-722 B.C. and then ravaged by the Babylonian Empire a century later. God will liberate Israel and punish its oppressors, but at a terrible price to another country. Babylon will be completely destroyed (50:21-51:58); "she shall never again be peopled, or inhabited for all generations" (50:39b).
- ▶ *Power, non-violence, and right relationship* (Isaiah 11:1-9; 42:1-4). These passages speak of the messianic figure, a servant-leader who is empowered by God's spirit to "govern the people with justice and equity, and whose only sword will be his strong and powerful word," Dempsey writes. This servant will counter oppression and bring justice to the nations, but with gentleness and compassion.



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The model of leadership suggested here is non-hierarchical, with the leader's power flowing from the indwelling spirit of God.

Jesus, the Messiah, embodied this vision of the servant-leader. God's divine power enabled him to seek reconciliation with those who executed him (Luke 22:34), and he passes this power to generations of disciples (Luke 24:49; John 20:22; Acts 1:8). God's power "is a blessing ... that has been poured out upon and entrusted to the community of believers," Dempsey concludes. "We, as members of this community living in a terrorist-torn and threatened world that totters on the brink of ecological disaster, are called to exercise this divine power, this divine spirit, and to help set it free within others as well."

### Study Questions

1. What can we learn from each of the three visions of God's power described in this study?
2. Is it important how we understand God's power? What difference does it make in our personal lives, our communities, and our national policies?
3. Comment on Dempsey's conclusion: "With Jesus, we have a mission to be carried out and a baptism to be received. In this regard, God's power is a curse because like Jeremiah and Jesus, we will have to go where we would rather not go, say what we would rather not say, and do what we would rather not do. We are the servants, the leaders of the new day spoken about by the prophets."
4. How does the hymn "O Young and Fearless Prophet" depict Jesus' divine power? What lesson does it draw for our day?

### Departing Hymn: "O Young and Fearless Prophet" (verses 1, 2, 3, and 6)

O young and fearless Prophet of ancient Galilee,  
your life is still a summons to serve humanity;  
to make our thoughts and actions less prone to please the  
crowd,  
to stand with humble courage for truth with hearts uncowed.

We marvel at the purpose that held you to your course  
while ever on the hilltop before you loomed the cross;  
your steadfast face set forward where love and duty shone,  
while we betray so quickly and leave you there alone.

O help us stand unswerving against war's bloody way,  
where hate and lust and falsehood hold back your holy sway;  
forbid false love of country that blinds us to your call,  
who lifts above the nations the unity of all.

O young and fearless Prophet, we need your presence here,  
amid our pride and glory to see your face appear;  
once more to hear your challenge above our noisy day,  
again to lead us forward along God's holy way.

*S. Ralph Harlow (1931), alt.*

*Suggested Tune: ST. THEODULPH*

# I Am About to Do a New Thing

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Isaiah 11:1-9; 42:1-4
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (review all)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 2	Questions 3 and 4
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To distinguish three aspects of the complex portrait of God's power in Israel's prophetic texts.
2. To interpret difficult prophetic passages which shock us with their brutality.
3. To understand how Jesus interpreted and revealed God's power as the Messiah.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prophetic Ethics (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

## Begin with a Story

Tell the group where you were on September 11, 2001, and how you found out about the attack on the World Trade Center in New York City. How should we respond? What does it mean to act in God's power in this situation? "The message of Jesus on September 10 was still the same on September 12," Cynthia Hockman-Chupp reminds us. "Jesus' message remains true today" (*Where Was God on September 11? A Study Guide for Congregations* [Herald Press, 2002]). Yet applying Jesus' message and understanding God's power has never been more difficult for us.

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Voice a request that members will experience God's power as a blessing that is liberating and restorative for all the creation.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a member to read Micah 4:1-4 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

This lesson presents three motifs within the portrait of God's power in Israel's prophetic tradition. Dempsey does not recommend that we isolate these strands and then choose from among them, but that we should interpret them together sensitively and within the context of Jesus' ministry. "Throughout the Old and New Testaments, particularly in the prophets, these varied expressions of power shift, interact, and intersect with one another," Dempsey observes. "When interpreted together, these shifts reveal not only the human condition but also the divine vision of the goal of the created order, which is life lived freely, fully, and in peace with God, one another, and all creation" (*Prophetic Ethics*, p. 22).

The scripture reading from Micah 4:1-4 frames the lesson by presenting a vision of God's intended future. The question naturally arises, "How will God bring about this peaceful future world when there is today so much human oppression and opposition to God's ways?" Of course, the prophets teach that God is powerful enough to accomplish the divine plan, though they describe God's power differently.

Three key passages exemplify the presentations of God's power as domination, as restoration and liberation, and as non-violent servant-leadership. As time permits, the group may want to discuss these passages thoroughly. If you extend this lesson over two sessions, you might reserve the discussion of the third presentation (of servant-leadership exemplified in Jesus' ministry) for the second session.

### *Study Questions*

1. Members may be shocked by the brutality and violence associated with God's power in the domination and liberation motifs. Yet, there is value in understanding God as "over" earthly powers; for instance, the book of Revelation echoes the themes of God's moral seriousness and complete victory over evil. The third motif, the servant-leader motif, shows the incompleteness of the vision of God as king; it also warns about our potential violent misuse of that vision.
2. We want to use power in our personal lives, communities, and nation in ways that honor God. If our model of God's power focuses only on domination, we may resort to responding quickly with violent force to dominate others. If Jesus' servanthood is our model of divine power, we may tend toward courageous forgiveness and reconciliation. You might illustrate these two different stances with contemporary examples; for instance, how would each stance apply to the current "war on terrorism" or call for war with Iraq?
3. Dempsey points out that acting in the power of God does not mean acting with overwhelming violence against our and God's enemies. We are not protected with superior force, but remain vulnerable to sacrificial suffering on behalf of enemies. (Jeremiah 20:7-18 expresses the prophet's anguish as he speaks God's word to the inattentive, uncaring, and abusive religious leadership of his day.)
4. The hymn is a prayer to Jesus to "help us stand unswerving against war's bloody way." Jesus' "humble courage" and single-minded purpose to embody God's love, even "while ever on the hilltop before [him] loomed the cross," should be our model. The hymn suggests why it is difficult to follow Jesus: we are tempted by "false love of country," "our pride and glory," and the competing ways of using power that clamor for our attention in "our noisy day." Our first challenge, then, is simply "to see [Jesus'] face appear" and "once more to hear [his] challenge" clearly.

### *Departing Hymn*

Verses 1, 2, 3, and 6 of "O Young and Fearless Prophet" are printed in the study guide. The suggested tune, ST. THEODULPH, should be familiar, for it is usually paired with the text "All Glory, Laud, and Honor." If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.