

Following the Risen Jesus: Spirit Powered!

Acts 2:1-22, 1 Peter 5:8-14

Good morning! It is good to be together. This has been a really hard week. I was ready to talk about that, and then things got REALLY strange and even harder late yesterday. Now we are sending out our worship consistent with the curfew that is currently in effect here. My head is spinning! This week was hard for our family as we grieved Betsey's passing, but also we have been grieving for our country. Everyone is on edge. Over a hundred thousand dead from COVID and counting. We are all sick of having our lives disrupted, we are worried about how to protect our neighbors and ourselves, we are antsy to get outside and have summery things. At the same time, we are horrified at the hate and violence and racism we see all over, again and again. We grieve for George Floyd and his family. We are stunned by the violence and anarchy in our own home. I am reminded of how God summarized what we are to do for the prophet Micah –what does God require of you? To do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. We need to do all three of those things right now. That is what we do.

I planned this sermon a long time ago, but it seems to be what we need right now. Our focus today is reality. Reality—what is actually real? What is most important? How do we get our feet on solid ground when it feels like the world is unhinged? I have good news to share today! Not just a reassuring wish, but truly good news, based in reality. We can have hope. We can have hope today. Not just hope but even confidence. As we come to grips with what is real, we can even understand something of the crazy all around us. Just as Peter said so long ago—after we have suffered a little while, God will restore, support and strengthen us and place us on a firm foundation. Friends, God is still on the throne. Today we'll see that: There is more to reality than meets the eye, the enemy is real, but God wins! There is more to reality than meets the eye, the enemy is real, but God wins!

We are in the middle of a culture war. Not just the war you might be thinking of, but an even more fundamental dispute about the nature of reality. For most of history almost everyone understood that our world is combination of BOTH physical and spiritual things.

Over the last few hundred years this has changed dramatically. There has been a growing push to claim that the world is ONLY physical. That all that exists is matter in motion. They claim there is no spiritual part of reality, all that matters is what we can sense and measure and manipulate. One name for idea is materialism. Materialism—the idea that “stuff” is all that matters. Materialism leads to very antisocial behavior—to power grabs and violence. But not only is it unhealthy for us, it is clearly false. It is a mistaken view of reality.

Thomas Nagel is perhaps the most respected philosopher in the world. Ten years ago he published a book called: *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist, Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False*. He argues that this materialist idea is “almost certainly false.” That is a surprising position because it goes against the strong trend in the academic elite. Even more surprising is that despite the implications of his argument, Nagel is an atheist. He does not believe in God—in fact he has said he does not even WANT to believe in God. But as a matter of intellectual honesty, he’s concluded that materialism must be wrong. As much as he would prefer a world with no spiritual side, there is, in fact, more to the world than just matter in motion. Nagel says that materialism is unbelievable— he calls it a “heroic triumph of ideological theory over common sense.” Nagel identifies numerous areas that show him that materialism falls short. Here are four—the development of life from nothing; the staggering variety of life on earth compared to the time available for it to develop; the existence of consciousness; and our ability to reason. No one has developed any successful materialistic explanations for any of these things. Blind particles alone acting randomly just can’t do it.

But you don’t have to read a big book by a philosopher to understand that there is more to the world than just particles. Many of you have probably had an experience like Alice and I did two weeks ago. We had spent some time with my sister in law Betsey on that Saturday, while she was in a coma—lying very still but alive. Then on Sunday we saw her a little while after she died. Physically her body was almost identical to the body we’d seen the day before, but there was no mistaking it—this was not Betsey anymore. Her body was there, but *she* was not home. That spark of life, the soul, her spirit—whatever you call it, it was gone and she was gone with it. Our world, reality, our very selves are a marriage of both the physical and the spiritual. Both parts are essential. The creation story in Genesis chapter 2 shows this. God

formed the people from the earth and he breathed into them. Both the physical body and the spiritual breath of God is needed for a living human. How interesting that the Bible story also points us ahead to a renewed creation where body and spirit are reunited in resurrection bodies!

As Hamlet told his friend—there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy. The truth about the world, about our universe, is that it is richer, more wondrous, and more beautiful than we can imagine. Each one of us is more complex, more amazing, and more miraculous than we ourselves know. We are made in the image of God!

Our first point is that the world is more than meets the eye—our world is a marriage of the physical with the spiritual. Both of our readings today address the spiritual reality of the world in different ways. Peter focuses on our spiritual opponent, and the Acts reading shows the incredible power of God’s Spirit at work in believers. Often people tend to brush off both of these stories because our materialistic biases make us uncomfortable with them. I want to encourage you to embrace these stories. They help us understand some crucial aspects of reality. To live a healthy life you need to deal with reality, not wishful thinking, so let’s jump in.

All of us have diseases on our minds these days. One of the biggest killers of all time is malaria. It is a huge problem still today. In 2017 there were more than 200 MILLION cases of malaria and over 400,000 people died from it. Incredibly, those numbers, huge as they are, are MUCH reduced from just 15 years earlier—about half as big. For years people struggled with making any impact on malaria. As one patient got treatment, many more got sick. No one could control it. It wasn’t until people realized that the disease spread by mosquitos that they could start to make progress. Once they identified the right enemy, THEN they could start to win the battle. We need to identify our true enemy too.

We have been reading Peter’s little letter to early believers since Easter, and now we are at its end. It is a letter of encouragement and realism. Encouragement and realism. Peter is saying that hard things will happen—conflict, oppression, even persecution—but he also says that we can persevere through it all because God is with us. But he warns us to watch out for the true enemy.

Peter wrote to Christians in what is now Turkey, and they were suffering from rejection and oppression from their neighbors—from the culture they lived in. Christians were outsiders and were marginalized. Here Peter gives us this last piece of advice. Listen to how the New Living Translation puts it: “Be careful! Watch out for attacks from the Devil, your great enemy. He prowls around like a lion, looking for some victim to devour.”

Who does Peter say is the great enemy? Not the people doing the oppressing! No—the enemy is the devil! The devil is prowling around, opportunistically looking for someone to destroy.

Now I know—people have trouble with even the idea of the devil. As C.S. Lewis said in the Screwtape Letters, some people think of a ridiculous little person with horns and hooves wearing red tights. They can’t believe in that, so they decide that they can’t believe in the real devil. Other people become fixated on the devil. The devil—the REAL devil—is fine with either of those outcomes. If we ignore him or pay him all our attention, he is free to do damage. We need to take him seriously, but remember that it is God who ultimately has all power, all glory, and all might for ever and ever. As Frederick Buechner wrote—“to take the devil seriously is to take seriously the fact that the total evil in the world is greater than the sum of its parts. Likewise the total evil in yourself.”

We have an opponent. One who wishes us ill. Who is looking to tear us apart. Look at what happened this week, and even in the last day. Horrible evil was done to murder George Floyd. He should have been safe in custody of people sworn to protect and serve him. Instead he was slowly suffocated in broad daylight on a city street while many people looked on. That evil—which grew out of decades of racism and hatred—that evil then grew and spread—all across the country, even to our own Library Square yesterday. Many peaceful protestors leavened with a few rioters cause a disaster. The devil is happy indeed! The devil is always looking to divide, to stir up hatred and violence and fear.

When we see division and conflict and hate arise—that is our enemy at work. Now don’t hear what I’m not saying—this is important! People doing bad things are responsible for their own bad actions. Absolutely. Racist cops who murder people in custody should be tried and punished. People burning police cars should be arrested. But our enemy is NOT the cop. It

is not the person who disagrees with us. It is not people crying out in pain or the looter or the fearful white guy demonstrating with an AR 15. No—none of those people, as bad as some of their actions might be—are our enemy. We are called to love them. We are called to serve them. We are called to act in a way that makes them ashamed of what they've done, not drive them to do worse things. Abraham Lincoln—a man who knew something about conflict and strife—said “do I not destroy my enemy when I make him my friend?” Do I not destroy my enemy when I make him my friend?

All people—however bad their actions—are all made in God's image and we are called to love them. That means to give sacrificially to help them, to work for their best. Our real enemy is the devil—the force stirring up our fear and anger and worst impulses. You see the devil is behind not only our temptations to sin, to do evil ourselves; but also behind the persecution and suffering that builds up and drives people to finally lash out. He is behind the systems of racism and oppression that have been keeping the boot on the neck of people on the margins for years. When we do justice and love mercy and walk humbly we frustrate the devil.

First Pres—let's keep the real enemy in mind. Let's surprise people on the other side of disputes with us by how we treat them. As Peter says, answer them with gentleness and respect. As we rightly seek to stand against the horror of hatred, violence, and racism—how can we do it in a way that draws people closer to Jesus, instead of driving them further away?

We are called to love our human enemies, to treat them kindly. In doing that we turn them into friends and attack our *real* enemy, the one who seeks our destruction. How can we possibly do that?

Only by the power and the gift of the Holy Spirit! That is what our reading from Acts teaches us. The story of Pentecost is the day that the church burst into the world from a locked room. This is an amazing picture of the POWER of God's Spirit! There was a sound of a mighty, rushing wind, and tongues of fire appeared on the people. Then everyone was suddenly speaking—sharing the good news of God's mighty, loving acts. And they were speaking in whatever language the people around them needed to hear. By God's design there were people from all over the known world in Jerusalem and they were able to see God's Spirit at

work. Five Thousand people became believers that day. The church was jumpstarted and has never stopped. God's Spirit changed lives then and changes lives today. The Spirit turned those scared disciples into bold ambassadors of the Good News about Jesus.

The devil manipulates people to give in to their worst impulses. But God's Spirit is not a puppeteer. No, the Holy Spirit cooperates with us and empowers us to do even more than we can imagine. To be better than we dare hope. To do abundantly, exceedingly more than all we can ask or even think! The devil destroys us, makes us less than human. The Holy Spirit moves in us to make us fully human, to live completely into the way God designed us. God's Spirit is the resource, the energy source, that can empower us to do the impossible!

Do you think God can move in power through His church right now as we are scattered in our locked rooms today? You, right now, today, are in the best position to live out God's plan for you. His Spirit is available to each of us—we are living stones built together to be the temple of God's Spirit in the world—and he can move and work in you and through you and through all of us together to turn the world upside down. Our world desperately needs to be turned upside down, but it does not need more violence or conflict. Lord have mercy. Help us to be your people and make us effective ambassadors of your love and good news. Father bring your kingdom on earth now!

Peter concludes his letter with encouragement—God will restore us and make us strong, firm and steadfast, and he gives us what we need most—peace. Our world is always full of conflict and strife. We always have the choice to add more strife or to bring peace. May we be brave, be bold for Jesus, and not give in to conflict and division. Peace to you my friends, in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Let's pray: Lord Jesus—Help! We want to follow you and yet we are so easily stirred to ungodly violence or cowed to devilish silence and complicity with evil. Help us to stand for you in this world. Send your Spirit afresh on us and move us in ways that please you and show your love and justice to a world that is starving for both. In your name we ask it. Amen.