



Charles Kutz-Marks, preaching

## This Spirit!

Easter, a, March 23, 2008  
John 20:1-18

My sisters and brothers, as we celebrate the special joy that is ours today, the defeat of the death and then the joy of the resurrection, we need also to take a step back... to take a wide-eyed look at Easter's claim in view of today's news, to overcome the brokenness of the world.

In order to understanding the Gospel joy, I'm afraid we must first allow ugly reality's presence. Let us use it for our education.

For example, have you been following terrorist activity on both sides in Israel and the Occupied Territories?

Mahmoud Abbas, Chairman of the Palestinian National Authority, and Ehud Olmert, Prime Minister of Israel, know the same Bible. Both have legitimate claims to the land. And at a deep spiritual level, both believe that they are in a great struggle, each seeing himself as David fighting Goliath.

I'm not asking you to pick sides, this morning. Instead, let's look into the hearts of the peoples on both sides. The Palestinians look long and hard at the Israeli seizure of their land in 1967, the harsh life that they live under Israeli occupation, their status as second class human beings in Israeli eyes. They want justice done. They have found the horrifying tool of suicide bombing works. So they use it. It appears that because of the Palestinians' use of the Qassam rockets<sup>i</sup> with an ever expanding range, that we are on the verge of another Israeli invasion of Gaza. But the Palestinians aren't going

to stop. They'll use other, more potent tools, when they get the chance. They have little to lose from Israeli reprisals. Life is miserable, death is not much of a deterrent. It doesn't hold much fear. ANGER is at the root of their psyche, seething, gnawing, unrelenting ANGER!

Now, the Israeli's are angry at the Palestinians, too. Anger motivates some of them to call for obliterating all the Palestinians. But underneath the ANGER, scratch just a little deeper, and you will find FEAR.

- Fear of the rising tensions with the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza;
- fear of their increasingly powerful weapons.
- Greater fear of an uprising of the nearly ¼ million Palestinians in East Jerusalem.
- Fear of all the Arab nations surrounding Israel, who are also seething with anger at the treatment of the Palestinians.
- Fear of any waning of U.S. support, their essential lifeline in the area. At the heart of the Israeli psyche, FEAR rules.

You and I may try to minimize the dynamic, saying, these are “only” emotions, Anger and Fear. But the people of the Middle East today, and their forbearers in Bible times, know the deeper truth. Fear and Anger when they come to dominate the lives of their hosts, become the foundations of an entire orientation to life. They come to circumscribe the bounds of the possible. They become dominating spirits of individuals and communities.

“Spirits? Come now preacher, this is the 21<sup>st</sup> century. You aren't going to tell us that you believe in “spirits” are you? Spirit possession and all that stuff.”

Yes, in a way, I am. I believe in spirits, not like in the movies, but spirits, yes. Not only do I believe in spirits. But I believe that spirits are at

the root of many more of our decisions and actions, more than we'd like to admit. Let me explain.

What is a spirit? Hang on with me, now, because this isn't simple. As the theologian Paul Tillich described it 50 years ago, a spirit is the unity of meaning on the one hand and power<sup>ii</sup> on the other. Meaning and power. **Meaning** suggests that there is a pattern of ideas that interrelate in ways that strengthen each other. Meaning is a pattern that coheres... a positive feedback system. For example, can you sense how love, forgiveness, selflessness, nonviolence, and peace relate to one another? Call forth any one of these and you will also be calling forth the others. They feed each other, support each other.

But can you also sense how need, fear, anger, loss, self-protection, ... feed each other? If one of those emotions, one of those drives comes to the fore, likely the others will be right there, too.

To someone living out of the first pattern of meaning, an outstretched hand, is a sign of friendship, of positive relationship. To someone living in the second pattern, an outstretched hand is an attempt at treachery.

We all live out of a set of a meanings, a rich web of interrelated ideas.

But a spirit is more than meaning, it is the unity of a system of meaning AND power. Without power it is of no real concern to us.

What is power? Power is simply the ability to get work done. You learned that in physics class, but it is just as true in interpersonal relations. Power is the ability to maintain or to change a situation: for good or ill. Everyone should have power as part of their God-given human endowment. In fact, we all do have power, though in differing degrees.

Take a look at the Romans of Jesus' day. They had power! They had defeated every foe they faced in the world that they lived in. Their empire was strong! They got work done. They achieved.

And they noticed power in others. You see, other powers were threats to their own power. So when on Palm Sunday they saw that this Jesus possessed a power over the people, evidenced by his ability to draw a crowd and charge them up, they started watching very carefully. What they didn't understand was the dynamic of Jesus' particular spirit and its Source, God.

And yes, Jesus represented power, too. He got things done. I'm not talking so much about the rare miracle that grabbed attention now and then: feeding multitudes to satisfaction with a little fish and bread.

- I'm talking about real important miracles, life changing miracles for the huge groups of people that heard him preach and teach.
- I'm talking about people who saw themselves as worthless, hopeless, ... getting a new perspective....

"Blessed are the meek!"

"Blessed are the poor."

- I'm talking about people who saw themselves as already finished, as losers, in this race of life, now beginning to see themselves as winners after all!

This alternative spirit of Jesus was:

freeing prostitutes and tax collectors;

liberating poor people and the politically powerless people and saying to them. "The Lord of the Universe forgives and accepts you.... you are Somebody! God cares enough about you to see that you get set free!"

Yes, the Romans were right to be frightened of this Jesus spirit. Eventually this particular Spirit would undermine their Empire and make it

finally impossible for any political system: Italian, or Russian, German or American, to claim allegiance of the soul of one who had been freed into this greater vision. The Romans were right to be frightened.

There was something about this Spirit that Jesus brought.

A unity of meaning and power.

Because it was loving.... it moved from a deep understanding that forgives oppressors, that can vow not to become like them, while at the same time refusing to submit to them. It is a complex spirit, a difficult spirit to live, but one that is finally so satisfying that it is worth all the struggle. And this spirit can take hold of people from time to time.

Ask the English Imperialists who dominated the vast nation of India in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, who had successfully kept the populace in line. Only very slowly did they come to understand that a crazy little brown man in a white cloth and sandals could use another form of organized power, non-violent power, flowing from this alternate spirit. The English had better shake. Their empire was coming down.

The white racists in my home town and probably in yours, whose ideology of superiority, was beginning to be challenged by a whole sea of black men, women and children, bold enough to submit themselves to this alternative spirit, this counter cultural spirit. Those racists were right to be frightened. It was a spirit on spirit battle. One spirit was coming down hard and vicious because it was of this world. The other Spirit would be victorious because it sprang from a deeper reality, a more godly-issuing than from the red-clawed world it sought to redeem.

This alternative spirit shows up in Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King and others, but quintessentially present in Jesus. This Spirit is what the Romans tried to crucify. But the poor Romans could only kill a

man. They couldn't kill this Spirit. Like a lawnmower trying to wipe out a dandelion, they appeared to take care of the situation, but all they really did was spread more seeds.

You see, all that they could kill was a man. The spirit that he possessed, the spirit that possessed him, could not be extinguished.

Not this spirit!

It passes like a fire from torch to torch, sometimes one lone flame dispelling a great sea of darkness. The Romans tried to put it out. They did what they could. But you can't quench it,

Not this spirit!

Oh, my sisters and brothers, this glorious Easter dawn, the question is not whether a spirit will inhabit us. Some spirit will always inhabit us. **The question is which spirit.** Easter means that there is a spirit, God's own spirit as we know it Christ, that God hopes we'll choose. This is a spirit that is ultimately victorious.

This spirit will not be bounded by Roman or English empires,

This spirit will not be crushed by racism or despair,

This spirit will not defined by or restricted to any one:

race, creed, sexual orientation, or nation,

This spirit will not be kept in any tomb,

This spirit will find new hosts... in the process, cutting free old loyalties.

Friends, I want this spirit to rule my life!

How about you?

Halleluiah, Christ is Risen!

<sup>i</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/feb/29/israelandthepalestinians1>

<sup>ii</sup> See Paul Tillich somewhere in his *Systematic Theology*. Try the great index at the end of it.