

“Power and Hope for the Broken-Hearted”
May 29, 2022

II Kings 2:4-12
Acts 1:1-11

To the long list that includes Iowa City, Newtown, Orlando, Charlotte, Las Vegas, El Paso, Dayton—we now add Buffalo and Uvalde. The history of our city and the university unite us with many other places—tying us to incidents of violence that shake not only a local community but the nation.

“God is near to the broken-hearted,” the President told the nation this past week, quoting the psalmist. “And saves those who are crushed in spirit.”

We are a nation of the broken-hearted. We are a congregation of crushed spirits. At first hearing the account of the ascension of Jesus might seem far removed from all that weighs so heavily on our spirits this morning. But this account of Jesus leaving his followers helps us as we try to move forward when God seems so absent.

Think about this *theologically*: The point of the ascension is not that Jesus is going a long way away but that he is being elevated to be the true Lord of the world. Ascension doesn't mean absence; it means sovereignty, exercised through the Spirit.

The Sovereign God unmasks the idols of our hearts and of our nation.

John J. Thatamani, who teaches at Union Theological Seminary, asks: “How can we determine whether we are in bondage to an idol? Intensity of reaction is a marker that we traffic with the sacred. We know that the gun has become a sacred object because it commands unquestioning reverence.” Questioning its status triggers anger and even death threats because the sacred calls for unconditional loyalty and obedience.ⁱ

When 20 people, mostly children, were killed in the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, it seemed as though as a nation we might have had enough of that kind of violence. But as the efforts for stronger background checks for those who would purchase guns grew, our own Senator, Charles Grassley said: “Criminals do not submit to background checks now. They will not submit to expanded background checks.”ⁱⁱ And nothing happened.

Our idols call for unconditional loyalty and obedience.

We as a nation keep electing people who bow to this idol and you know the results: 185 children killed in school shootings since Columbine, countless others shot and killed elsewhere. And over three hundred thousand children who were injured in school shootings, witnessed their classmates and teachers being shot, or sought shelter in barricaded classrooms, bathrooms and closets.

One person wrote this past week: “There is only one possible conclusion: We are willing to tolerate the murder of children...in exchange for what Ted Cruz called "the fundamental, God-given right each and every one of us has to defend our lives, to defend our homes, to defend our children, to defend our family.”

The concern about idolatry that we find in the Bible is not so much about worshipping statues as it is about chasing after other ways, following other paths that deny the creative and life-giving power of God.

The leaders and prophets of Israel raised some of their strongest condemnation against the followers of Moloch, the Canaanite god associated with child sacrifice—a god who promised life but demanded death instead. As the prophet Amos made clear, the living God calls for justice and righteousness, not child sacrifice.

So Thatamani concludes: “Only by recognizing the gun as an idol can we explain why we stand in helpless thrall to it even though more Americans have been killed by it, children included, than in all of America’s foreign wars combined. Idols are bloodthirsty; they are never satisfied.”ⁱⁱⁱ

And here’s the thing: there are people and organizations that would prefer this sense of powerlessness to continue, even to increase. A feeling of powerlessness means that individuals, congregations, communities—even our entire nation—are not able to act in our own best interests or for the well-being of our community, our nation, our world.

From the scriptures this day we get another vision.

We get a different sense of what is and isn’t possible.

“You will receive power,” the risen Christ tells his followers: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.”

We hear assurance that in the face of all that would work against us, we will find the courage, the strength, the love—the *power*—to make the healing mercy of God real in this world.

Power is the *ability to act*. And it comes to each one of us.

The power of God is a creative ability that lets us use our own wealth, authority, knowledge, and privilege for the good of all people.

This power not so much descends upon us as it wells up within us when we take what Jesus says seriously and then act upon it.

When those who cling to authority won’t listen, Jesus says: “Let those who have ears to hear, hear.” He calls *us* to listen for the pain in the world. He invites *us* to listen for the longing for the good within ourselves.

When those directing the course of our nation simply don’t care, Jesus calls forth our compassion, telling us: “Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me.”

When the elected elites show their apathy and idolatry, Jesus offers us a new commandment: “Love one another as I have loved you.”

The Ascension tells us of God’s continuing presence with us as individuals and as a community of faith. This Jesus who is gone is the one who said, “I am with you always.” Because Christ has ascended, we live in the power of the Spirit that Christ sends. The same force that empowered Jesus is here within us and among us. Because Jesus is not physically present to a *few* people, God’s Spirit of power and life is given to *all* who will receive it.

God is here in all the good things in life. And God is also with a creation that suffers, with people

who know sin and brokenness. God is present when the cross is heavy to bear.

The news on any given day can lead us to feel powerless—maybe more so in the last couple of weeks. We get overwhelmed. We run out of energy.

You know, maybe I should just speak for myself. I'm overwhelmed. I'm out of energy.

Perhaps you are, too.

In the midst of all that overwhelms us

We are given the power to take charge of our lives, to change what needs changing.

We are given the power to be agents of God's love in the world—to take risks for the good.

We are given the power to simply keep going.

Remember how Martin Luther King put it: “There is a great benign Power in the universe whose name is God, and God is able to make a way out of no way, and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. This is our hope for becoming better men and women. This is our mandate for seeking to make a better world.”^{iv}

It is time once more to recover hope in a world that can seem hopeless.

It is time to recover hope in society that can create so much despair.

Hope asks the question: “What kind of future are we building for ourselves?”^v In other words, hope is not about positive thinking or wishing hard that something might happen. Hope asks about what we are *doing*.

So the question comes to each of us as individuals and all of us as a congregation: What kind of future are we building? What action can we take—even today—to bring us closer to our desires? What harvest do we want to gather?

This is not the time for the silence that stifles the outrage we feel.

This is not the time for the silence that stifles calls for change.

Walk a half block from here and find T. Anne Cleary Walkway, that place where the memory of gun violence calls to each of us and all of us to raise our voices.

Live in hope.

Do not accommodate.

Do not adjust.

Do not back down.

You will receive power.

And with that promise, as we heard again this morning from the Book of Acts, Christ was “lifted up” into heaven.

This is what we have heard.

This is what we affirm today.

This is what we have come to know: Christ no longer *with us* is Christ powerfully *present for us* at all times.

The risen Christ who reigns in power gives us the ability to act in the world as agents of God's new creation.

God's "Yes" will be our strength and our power.

And the Easter message will echo throughout our lives:

Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed.

ⁱ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-price-of-freedom-child-sacrifice-and-the-american_b_59e6b836e4b0432b8c11eb18

ⁱⁱ <http://www.npr.org/2013/04/18/177812397/conn-governor-lambastes-senate-after-gun-control-bill-fails>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-price-of-freedom-child-sacrifice-and-the-american_b_59e6b836e4b0432b8c11eb18

^{iv} Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Strength to Love*, in *A Testament of Hope*, pg. 509.

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Kennon Callahan, "Hope," in *Twelve Keys for Living*