

In 2001, documentary filmmaker Joshua Oppenheimer was in Indonesia working on a film. He and his partner began investigating the Indonesian genocide of 1965-66, an event that has received little attention from outside Indonesia.

Set against the backdrop of the Cold War and US involvement in the Vietnam war, an allegedly pro-democracy party that called themselves the New Order staged a military coup and took over the country. To consolidate their power, the New Order staged anti-communist purges, eventually killing an estimated 1 million people over the course of a year.

The New Order won the day, and still rules Indonesia today. What Oppenheimer discovered when he was in Indonesia was that history there (as everywhere) is written by the winners. No one acknowledges the genocide. He described it as visiting Germany 40 years after the Nazis had won World War 2.

[Image of Congo] In his research, he meets Anwar Congo, a gangster who was promoted to lead the largest death squad in North Sumatra - he allegedly personally killed 1,000 people. What shocked Oppenheimer in his encounter with Congo was how remorseless he was about what he had done. He boasted of what he had done, rejected the term "war crime". Again and again, Congo insists he is not a murderer but a "free man".

Oppenheimer decided to document Congo and his friends, in a film released in 2012 called "The Act of Killing". In one haunting scene, Congo takes the film crew to a rooftop where he killed hundreds. He reenacts the killings, then starts doing a cha cha, happy and carefree.

It's deeply messed up.

And it raises questions that make me (and I bet you!) deeply uncomfortable. Where is the justice in this situation? The murderers are still in power. It's been 50 years and Indonesia doesn't even acknowledge anything *happened*, let alone move toward reconciliation and restoration.

What do you do with a man like Anwar Congo?

And even a casual student of history knows this is only the tip of the iceberg on the world stage. There are lots of Anwar Congos in the world, and those of us in this room are powerless to stop them.

How do we resist in the face of these giant, impossible evils? What are we who are powerless to do anything that has an impact really supposed to do?

Friends it is precisely because of these impossible evils that we need faith. Faith calls us to look beyond ourselves, to cry out for the God who is bigger than us and trust that God is bigger than these evils too. Today, we'll see that clinging to God's way in the world and living out the story of Jesus *even in the face of these big evils* is the only hope we have of resurrection, of new life.

We'll see that those who perpetrate violence and oppression, people like Congo and his friends, are locked in prisons of fear, and our persistent, self-sacrificial love can unlock those prisons and bring justice for both victims *and* perpetrators of violence.

We're in the season of Eastertide, the season of the Church year where we investigate the implications of the resurrection. What difference does it make *today* that Jesus was raised from the dead? Our series this year is working through the book of 1 Peter. It's called *Strangers in a Strange Land* because Peter is guiding early Christians on how to live in a world hostile to their commitment to follow Jesus. We've been comparing Peter's vision of faith and humanity to some classic science fiction visions of the future.

Today, we're not doing a sci-fi story. In part, that's because our Scripture for today is pretty sci-fi (you'll see what I mean in a minute). In part, that's because today's scripture is the culmination of an argument Peter has been making over the last three weeks and I really want to ground it in our real world.

[Scripture Slide] Turn with me to 1 Peter 3. A couple of weeks ago, we looked at the words Peter had for the slaves in the churches he was writing to. We discussed how his words have been used by Christians to oppress and abuse when that was totally contrary to Peter's desires. Peter spoke to people who, somewhat like us, were powerless to change their circumstances. He challenged them to live into their calling as God's children. Then, last week, Peter showed them (and us!) that they're living in a bigger story - the story of the God of the universe, that stretches back to the beginning of time and all over the world. He invited them to live into that story, to embody Jesus' death and resurrection in their everyday lives.

And now today, he's going to show them how living out the Jesus story can transform not just them, but their slave masters. Today, Peter insists that the Jesus story can rescue even people like Anwar Congo. Jesus is in fact the only one who can challenge those big systems of evil we are powerless to resist. Today is going to be very good news, friends. But it's going to get a little weird first.

Let's read 1 Peter 3, beginning in verse 13:

Now, who will want to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you suffer for doing what is right, God will reward you for it. So don't worry or be afraid of their threats. Instead, you must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way. Keep your conscience clear. Then if people speak against you, they will be ashamed when they see what a good life you live because you belong to Christ. Remember, it is better to suffer for doing good, if that is what God wants, than to suffer for doing wrong!

Christ suffered for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but he died for sinners to bring you safely home to God. He suffered physical death, but he was raised to life in the Spirit.

Peter points out that the vast majority of people - even those who don't follow Jesus - aren't going to give them trouble if they do good. He reminds them that even if they do suffer, God will reward them (we saw that in the first week - that God works in our suffering to refine us). And he challenges them to be ready to share why they serve Jesus (gently and respectfully).

As we've seen him do before, Peter grounds all of this in Jesus' resurrection.

But there's a fascinating observation Peter makes early in these verses that this translation obscures. I want to show you how a more literal translation renders verses 14-15, because Peter points out *why* those in power are so often cruel and abusive:

**Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. -- 1 Peter 3:14-15 NRSV**

Peter says they're *afraid*. That's why they're violent, abusive, cruel. What are they afraid of? Well, they're afraid of what we all fear: failure, loss, pain. They are afraid of losing their identity (as a powerful, wealthy person). They're afraid of losing their position (which affords them the privileges of power). And so out of fear, they lash out at anyone who is not Them. (Sounds suspiciously like the Communist purges Anwar Congo led in Indonesia).

Jesus frees us from fear by inviting us to follow him to the Cross. To crucify our old selves - our power, our privileges, our identity. Anything the world teaches us to put value in. We count all those as lost. We mark them 'unrecoverable'.

What can you take from someone who's lost everything?

Nothing. Anwar Congo thought that killing to protect his position made him free. But true freedom comes in not valuing your position, your privilege, your status. When we surrender these things and allow God to make us new, to be reborn, we are free to love those who are still trapped in prisons of fear.

This is why, says Peter, the story of the Cross has so much power. Our lives become a constant sermon, inviting those trapped by fear to let go of the things they cling to so hard and find life in letting go of their fear, hatred and oppression.

That seems too good to be true - claiming all we need is love to conquer evil. But that's why Peter goes on to explain how Jesus' resurrection defeated the larger spiritual powers that are behind these giant evils. (And just a heads-up: here's where things get weird:)

**Christ suffered for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but he died for sinners to bring you safely home to God. He suffered physical death, but he was raised to life in the Spirit.**

So he went and preached to the spirits in prison—those who disobeyed God long ago when God waited patiently while Noah was building his boat. Only eight people were saved from drowning in that terrible flood. And that water is a picture of baptism, which now saves you, not by removing dirt from your body, but as a response to God from a clean conscience. It is effective because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Now Christ has gone to heaven. He is seated in the place of honor next to God, and all the angels and authorities and powers accept his authority. -- 1 Peter 3:20-22

So after Jesus was raised from the dead, he went and preached to the "spirits in prison", who - according to Peter - disobeyed God during the days of Noah.

What?!

Peter references the Flood story in Genesis 6 - Noah and the Ark. One of the reasons the world gets so bad before the flood is because the "sons of God" fall in love with the "daughters of men" and have children called Nephilim (which is a Hebrew word that means 'Fallen Ones'). Sons of God in Genesis are what we would call 'angels'. Heavenly beings. And daughters of men are human women. So these Nephilim, whatever they are, are heavenly-human hybrids (I know this sounds like a crazy *Underworld* sequel).

But here's the problem: Genesis doesn't tell us anything else about these Nephilim or why they're so bad. A lot of Genesis is like that. Big questions like "Where did Cain get a wife?" are aggressively ignored. So for most of biblical history, readers like you and me have taken these spaces as an invitation to imagine, to dream, to fill in the gaps between the stories.

One of the most famous examples of this is a book called 1 Enoch. It was written a couple of hundred years before Jesus was born, and it was *very* popular among Jews and early Christians. 1 Enoch is sort of an Ancient Jewish version of science-fiction. It's set in the days of Noah, and it's written as though by Enoch, Noah's great-grandfather. Enoch takes a journey to Heaven and is given a tour of the behind-the-scenes of reality. One of the things Enoch sees is the Watchers, which is what he calls those Sons of God. According to Enoch, the Nephilim - the children of the Watchers and human women - are the evil spirits that work in the world (what we would probably call demons).

That's right... among other things, 1 Enoch is a sort of origin story for evil spirits in the world. And *that* matters because Peter and everyone else in the ancient world knew that evil empires like Rome didn't just exist on their own power. They were empowered by spirits, powers far greater than mere humans. Powers like the children of the Watchers.

Now: all of that is pretty fun (and very weird). But don't get lost in the details. Peter isn't trying to get you to be a fan of 1 Enoch. He is helping us resist overwhelming Evil in the world. Evil that Scripture

identifies as dark, powerful forces larger than humanity. Evils we face in our world are not merely the product of human sin. We are also captive to spiritual forces beyond our ability to confront.

The reason evils like genocide and racism and systemic discrimination seem too big for us to confront is because they *are*. The Scriptures unapologetically tell us that in our sin, we have sold ourselves to these powers.

Or, rather, we *were* at their mercy. Because, according to Peter, when Jesus rose from the dead, as he ascended to the throne of Heaven, he went to these Spirits and announced, 'Game over, man.'

They thought they had won on the Cross. When Jesus came to Jerusalem that Holy Week, all the powers of evil amassed to confront him. And they thought, when they crucified him, that they had won. Once and for all.

But then, God raised Jesus from the dead, demonstrating that God, not they, was in control of human destiny. God, not the powers, would set the agenda for human history. And that means every prison has been unlocked.

When Jesus went to these Spirits, he declared to them they had lost, that they could no longer rule over humanity.

The control they have over us is an illusion. We are all free, if we will only follow Jesus to the cross, surrender all the junk we cling to - our identity, our power, our privilege. We are all free if we will only allow God to give us new life, resurrected into a world free of the powers that once controlled us.

Take a big step back with me for a moment and look at what Peter is doing:

He is writing to Christians who are suffering for following Jesus. He knows, as do they, that they are powerless to change their larger situation. They're slaves and wives and poor and oppressed. So he encourages them: where you are, be not who the world tells you to be. Be who you were created to be. Be like Jesus.

And even if you suffer, know God is refining you. Know that when you live these holy lives, you are preaching freedom to your oppressors. Because they're trapped in prisons of fear, held captive by the same powers you were once afraid of. They don't know that Jesus has been raised from the dead. They don't know the powers have been defeated. They don't know that all that stands between them and freedom is their own unwillingness to surrender, to follow Jesus to the cross.

So show them. By your own example show them the freedom that comes from losing yourself and finding yourself in God.

That's a big ask. But living out the Jesus story can have powerful consequences.

Remember Anwar Congo, the Indonesian man who killed 1,000 people and felt no remorse? It turns out he was a little obsessed with Hollywood. So the documentarian, Oppenheimer, invited him and his friends to make a movie of their "great victory" (which remember was actually a genocide). It's this filmmaking the documentary *The Act of Killing* is actually about. We watch as Anwar Congo and his friends get into makeup and use practical effects to recreate the violence they unleashed on thousands of their compatriots.

At one point, Anwar Congo himself plays one of his victims.

It's a gruesome thing to see.

And then, Oppenheimer has Anwar Congo watch his movie. Anwar Congo sees himself as the recipient of the violence enacted upon him. Anwar Congo watches as the violence he did is done to him. Anwar Congo sees himself as the victim.

And somehow, something happens to Anwar Congo. The final scene of the film finds him running back up to that rooftop, overcome by horror at his own actions. The camera watches as he retches on the ground, finally face to face with the evil he did.

*The Act of Killing* was released in 2012. In the five years since, Indonesia society has begun to transform. The government has - for the first time since the 1960s - admitted they carried out the killings. The genocide is now being taught in schools. Slowly but surely, the country is moving toward reconciliation, toward justice and peace for all citizens.

Because of a story. Because the oppressor saw himself reflected in the image of the oppressed.

Friends, this is the power of Peter's promise to those first Christians. When we insist on living out the Jesus story, we invite those who hurt us to witness our humanity. In doing so, we hold up a mirror to them, invite them to see themselves too - not as monsters, but as fearful prisoners who no longer have to stay imprisoned because Jesus' resurrection unlocked every cell.

If a story can bring an author of genocide to face his crimes, then friends, living out the story of Jesus can transform our relationships, our vocations, our friend circles.

Because God raised Jesus from the dead, we can live out the story of Jesus. We can proclaim freedom to all those trapped in prisons of fear. Even - especially - those who mean us harm.

### **Communion**

We act out the story of Jesus by following him to the Cross. When Jesus broke bread with his disciples and said take, eat this is my body, take drink, this is my blood, he was enacting something mysterious, something larger than the physicality of that bread and wine in that room with those disciples. He was

doing more than giving us a way of having positive thoughts and more will-power to overcome our obstacles. This is good news for us, because we need something large, and mysterious, something bigger than ourselves to address large evils in the world and in our lives. When we take communion we too enact that larger mystery, that bigger truth, that God has conquered death and evil. And we are formed- by that enacting- into people who no longer try to protect our privilege but who instead rely on a power larger than our own power, a power that bends human history toward justice and love.

Examen:

1. When in the last week did my life look like Jesus?
2. When did I feel overwhelmed by the evils of the world?
3. How can I faithfully imitate Jesus in that space this week?

**Assignment/Blessing**

We are the ambassadors of love and freedom. We open prisons of fear and invite captives into the light!

Where do you need to live out the Jesus story?