**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church**

**Watertown, WI**

**“Test the Spirits”**

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“*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world”* (1 John 4:1).

Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. In Wisconsin, the myth of Bigfoot endures. People actually believe he or they are out there. Some years ago, there was another sighting near Holy Hill. It made the evening news. A group of guys were utterly convinced they saw Bigfoot. But think about that. In an era where billions of people carry smartphone cameras, many of them hunters, hikers, and campers crisscrossing state forests; in an era where there are trail cams and door cams, car cams, drone cameras, infrared cameras . . . still, no one has managed to come up with clear, compelling evidence. Yet, the myth endures.

Many Americans also believe in ghosts, the efficacy of palm readers, the usefulness of astrology, and the possibility of communicating with the dead. Famously, a Baylor University study show the irreligious are far more likely to believe in these things than are conservative Christians. Atheists are more susceptible to superstition than Christians. It seems one of the effects of not believing in God is that you lose your common sense and can’t see things as they are. Said another way, if you believe nothing, you are more likely to believe anything.

In 2019, a Gallup poll found that 33% of American adults believed that some UFO sightings are actual sightings of alien spacecraft. Two years later, that figure has jumped to 41%. In an era where telescopes and satellites scan—and airplanes constantly crisscross—the skies, still no one has managed to produce a single clear image of a nonhuman aircraft in the sky. Yet, 41% of Americans seem to think they’re real.

Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. Now this is what keeps me up at night. What will happen if Artificial Intelligence starts fabricating extraordinary evidence to go along with the extraordinary claims? What will happen if convincing but bogus videos and photographs go viral? Government officials will say it’s phony, but who trusts them? Many will be deceived, and who will be behind the deception? Jesus said, “There is no truth in the devil. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (Jn. 8:44).

That is, behind every lie, behind every false teaching and dangerous deception, there is a very real demon. So, if the devil is behind deception, you just know he will be targeting God’s people because the devil hates us and wants to destroy us and our faith.

Our text says, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world*”* (1 Jn. 4:1). John is simply saying don’t believe everything you hear or see, because there are many false teachers in the world and more on the way. John calls them pseudo-prophets, because they pretend to bring the truth while they do the opposite. They present lies as truth. Or they mix a little truth into their lies making it even harder to discern. Many false prophets have gone out into the world, and many more are on the way. As Christians, we must not be naïve or gullible. Ephesians 4 says, don’t be like “children tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes” (v. 14). Proverbs 14 says, “The simple believes everything, but the prudent gives thought to his steps” (v. 15). In Matthew 10, Jesus said, “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” We *must* exercise better discernment.

“Test the spirits,” John says. Note well that all Christians are told to do this testing. John does not take it out of your hands and reserve it for the clergy or the government or for academia. All Christians are to be about testing the truth. We can and should help each other in making the proper tests. Proverbs 11 says, “In the abundance of counselors there is safety” (v. 14). Yet, at the final judgment, each Christian is personally responsible for what he or she has accepted or rejected as truth.

Therefore, be wary, because there are many who seek to deceive you, and the devil has his tricks too. In Matthew 24, Jesus, speaking of the end times, said, “For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.” Be wary. Be humble, and acknowledge you too can be susceptible. Allow yourself to be corrected graciously.

How will you recognize false prophets? One thing a false prophet cannot tolerate is having his/her teaching rejected. Think of those who would want you to believe the universe in all its intricacies is just the result of evolution. Or think of those who would teach you unborn babies are not persons; therefore, their lives can be trashed. Think of those who would teach you there are many genders . . . even dozens of them. If you reject their doctrines, they will fly into a rage. They will attack your character. They will question your motives and your intelligence. They will call you names. They will assert they are the expert in the field; how dare you hold an opinion contrary to their expertise! Your job? Test the spirits to see whether they are from God.

The world is full of counterfeits. In John’s day, coins were constantly weighed and closely inspected before they were accepted. Sometimes they would test with magnets (gold and silver are not attracted to magnets). They would scratch the coins to see if there was a base metal underneath a thin layer of gold or silver. Sometimes, they would even pour acid on coins to see how the metals reacted. We must also be wary of accepting counterfeit truths; test and keep on testing the spirits.

Each Christian is personally responsible for this. However, we are not left to ourselves. First, we have God’s Word. Psalm 119, “The unfolding of Your Words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple” (v. 130). God’s Word helps us with discernment. Hebrews 4, “For the Word of God is alive and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” All Scripture is useful for this teaching, rebuking, correcting (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Not just God’s Word. God Himself helps us. In verse 15 of this same chapter, John writes, “Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.” That is, God is within every believer. 1 Corinthians 3 says the same thing with these words, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (v. 16). Jesus said it this way, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and We will come to him and make our home with him” (Jn. 14:23).

This gives us a tremendous advantage to recognize lies, untruths, and false teachings. Verse 4 of our text says, “Little children, you are from God and have overcome [the spirit of the antichrist], for He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.” The one in the world refers to Satan, and he is no match for our God.

Satan is mad. He knows his time is short before he is eternally banished to hell (Rv. 12:12). So, Satan is raging while he can, spewing out lies and deceptions, especially aimed at God’s people. But Christ dwells in us. Luther said, “Christ is stronger; He *has* overcome, *is* overcoming, and *will* overcome that strong man” (AE 26:193).

Verse 5 says, “They [unbelievers] are from the world; therefore, they speak from the world and the world listens to them. We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.” That is, all who are in fellowship with Jesus recognize and listen to the true teaching of Christ when they hear it.

In John 16, Jesus said, “When He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth. . . He will tell you what is yet to come” (v. 13). That word “guide” in the Greek means to lead, as a travel guide.

Wouldn’t it be great to have travel guide Rick Steves take you and your family to his favorite locations in Europe, avoiding the tourist traps, avoiding the lines, avoiding the dull and tedious? Just the best Europe has to offer. But you have something better! You have the Holy Spirit guiding you through life . . . guiding you into a clearer understanding of God’s truth as you make your way in the world. It’s not a promise you won’t rebel and turn to your own way. It is a promise He is there to guide you if you allow Him.

Therefore, having God with us and in us, we don’t need superstitions. We don’t need astrologers or palm readers guessing about the future. It’s enough that God will be in us and with us to shepherd us through the future. And we don’t need those who try to consult the dead, because God detests such things (Deut. 18:10-12). Besides, God has promised “He who believes and is baptized shall be saved” (Mk. 16:16). That’s enough. We don’t need to know more. And in the middle of the night, I shouldn’t be doomscrolling in my head about the ways AI could throw everyone into an unholy confusion. Why? Because we have the Word that gives us clarity and discernment, and because our God is and will be our guide. Trust in Him. He will help you test the spirits and discern the truth. Thanks be to God.