

Sermon Luke 4: 14-21 *The Spirit of the Lord is Upon Me* January 24, 2016

And now Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, - and news of Him spread through all the surrounding district. He taught in their synagogues, to everyone's admiration. Then He came to Nazareth where He had been brought up and, according to His custom, went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day. Jesus stood up to read the scriptures and the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. He opened the book and found the place where these words are written – "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because God has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. God has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to preach the acceptable you of the Lord." Then Jesus shut the book, handed it back to the attendant and resumed His seat. Every eye in the synagogues was fixed upon Him and He began to tell them, "This very day this scripture has been fulfilled, while you were listening to it!"

This past week the United Methodist pastors in our Conference gathered at Mt. Hermon with Bishop Brown for our annual meeting. The keynote speaker talked about her healing from a traumatic brain injury, which included art therapy, prayer, and working with a shaman. She brought a shaman with her and he took part in her presentation with music and a variety of tools he'd brought along, including feathers, fans, and noise-makers. In some cultures it's believed that a shaman is able to use magic to cure people who are sick and to control future events. Many pastors at this gathering were perplexed and offended, including some of our ethnic pastors who converted to Christianity from the old way, the old religion, of shamanism. It was an interesting experience to say the least. Why am I telling you about it? In part it's because I want to share what I experienced last week, and how that informed what I believe and because it relates to today's scripture lesson (and hopefully this is always true in a sermon.)

Before we look at this pericope from Luke's gospel let's look at it in the fuller context. The danger of taking a pericope as the "gospel" (which means "good news" but can also be used to mean "*the* absolute truth as I interpret it") is that it separates it from the good news as a whole. The bible as a whole tells us about God, about our history as God's people, and about ourselves. The bible tells us of God's creative, redeeming, and sustaining love, and that God created humanity in order to share that love with us. To take a pericope out of context is a danger because it can be used to hurt or exclude or control people and it doesn't tell... God's whole story.

At the end of chapter 3 of Luke's gospel Jesus was baptized, and at the beginning chapter 4, the Holy Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness where He was tempted by the devil. Now we pick up the story line, where Luke tells us that having been tested by the devil, Jesus returned to Galilee, "powerful in the Spirit." In the synagogue, in His hometown, Jesus both read Isaiah's prophecy and declared His ministry, His calling from God, His purpose. This is from the Message translation. [Jesus said] "God's Spirit is on Me; God's chosen Me to preach the Message of good news to the poor, sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the burdened and battered free, to announce, "This is God's year to act!" After Jesus told the congregation that Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled that day, in their hearing, they

grumbled that Jesus was just the carpenter's son... "Who does He think He is?" And they became outraged at His blasphemy, His audacity, and tried to kill Him.

Let's retrace Jesus' steps before He read in the synagogue. The Holy Spirit had led Him into the waters of baptism, where He saw God's presence in the form of a dove, and heard God's voice proclaim God's love and joy and blessing upon Him. Last Sunday we baptized the De Torres twins, and in that sacrament God's love and joy and blessings were present. To begin our ministry, to fulfill our purpose, to live into our own calling, we also have to, as Jesus did, be immersed in the love, joy, and blessing of God. We have to believe the words He heard are also meant for us... that we are worthy of being called "God's beloved."

It was in the congregation where Jesus was known that He declared His calling. This is true of United Methodist pastors: we have to declare in our home congregations our intent to serve God as pastors, and ask for the congregation's affirmation and support. We should all do this: declare within the congregation where we are known and loved our calling, our purpose, our intent to follow Jesus, to serve God by [blank]_____. We each have to fill in the blank, we have to know and declare our purpose and calling, or we're in danger of just warming the pews.

Because we are followers of Jesus our calling and purpose needs to align with His. We need to return to this gospel lesson from Luke again and again because it tells us what Jesus' plumb line was... and we need to know if our plumb line - how we measure our lives, our mission, our ministry - is true with His. I said last Sunday that by participating in the sacrament of baptism we had symbolically followed the De Torres twins into those risky and unpredictable waters where we die to sin and self and rise in new life in Christ. The waters of baptism are risky because in that new life we belong to God, and God is going to have God's way with us. In that new life the Spirit of the Lord comes upon us, so that God can use us to bring new life to others, to "heal the brokenhearted, to bring deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed." This is our calling and we live into and grow into and enmesh it differently, according to our gifts and abilities, but it is the same calling Jesus had.

There is a story about a young child who asks his mother where he came from. His mother sighs, realizing that it's time for her to tell her child in simple but accurate words about procreation, about love and sex. She does her best to explain human anatomy and desire and what it produces. Finally, seeing his perplexed little face, the mother asks her son if he has any questions. He tells her that he'd found out that his best friend had come from Wisconsin to California, and he wondered where his family had come from.

When we come to church because it's our habit, or what good people do, or because our friends are here (all okay reasons to attend worship) we are somewhat like that little boy. We're not asking for too much information, not looking for intimate details about the love affair God wants with humanity. Who knew? That when we first started down this path of following Jesus His calling would be our calling... His life purpose the same as ours? I invite you to find your calling and purpose in Isaiah's prophecy and read it with me. It's on page 3 of the bulletin towards the top, and starts with the words, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me." Let's read that together.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. God has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to preach the acceptable you of the Lord.” One of my bible commentaries also includes the words: “to proclaim a new beginning for all who have failed.”

Jesus said in the synagogue, to people who’d known Him all of His life, people who thought they knew who Jesus the carpenter’s son was, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Today, brothers and sisters in Christ, is the day the Lord has given us to begin to fulfill God’s purpose for us, and for the world. This is the day the Lord has given us to enact and en flesh (to give words and actions) that proclaim the day of the Lord’s favor. God is going to use us to fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy and Jesus’ mission.

There is a sense of urgency in our mission. There is a darkness and despondency in the world that we need to speak to... with love, with compassion, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, that the day of the Lord is at hand. This is word of God for us, and this is God’s time for us. And lest we are overwhelmed by the enormity of God’s call let’s remember Mother Teresa’s words: “We cannot do great things on this earth, only small things with great love.”

I was one of the pastors at the gathering last week who was dismayed and disappointed by the presence of the shaman. There are wonderful and diverse resources within our faith tradition and we need to learn more of them, draw on them, and lead from them. We believe in the power and presence of God’s Holy Spirit, and that in baptism we are anointed with that Spirit. To call on other spirits leaves us vulnerable to spirituality for its own sake and to worshiping false gods. But the presence of the shaman at this gathering of pastors reminded me and grounded me in what I believe and Who I follow. Jesus Christ is my plumb line and His calling and His purpose need to be mine.

I also believe that I can’t limit how and where and through whom the Spirit of God will work. Rumi was a 13th century Islamic scholar, Sufi mystic, and poet, whose writing transcends differing religions and ideology. He believed (as I do) that music, poetry, and beauty are paths that reach to God. He reminds me about the importance of orthodox beliefs matched by orthodox praxis. What that means is if I believe in and witness to a God of radical and inclusive love, my words and actions must testify to that. Eight centuries ago Rumi wrote, “Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.”

The shaman at the Gathering of the Orders didn’t speak to me, didn’t guide me in the path of following Christ. But his presence and his participation reminded me of what I believe. That’s the place we all must come to: what is it that we believe? What’s the plumb line of purpose and calling and truth for us? For me this pericope from Luke’s gospel is the plumb line. The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, and God has anointed us to be bearers of the good news that God’s kingdom has begun, that God’s light is stronger than any darkness, and that God’s love can overcome hatred and evil.

Jesus said to those who heard His purpose, His calling, that this is the year of the Lord’s favor. I wonder: can we live in this new year as if this is the year of the Lord’s favor? Can we live with the sense of purpose and urgency that Jesus had to proclaim God’s mercy, compassion, and freedom for all people?

During the coming season of Lent, which starts soon - February 10th - I encourage you to find spiritual practices that will help you proclaim and enflesh what Jesus said as He began His ministry. (This is the Amplified Bible translation.) "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me because God has anointed Me to preach the good news to the poor. God has sent Me to announce pardon and forgiveness to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, bruised, and crushed by tragedy, and to proclaim the day when salvation and the favor of God abound greatly."

Today, in your hearing, in our congregation, may Jesus' words find a home in you, and may you live boldly in the knowledge that the Spirit of the Lord is upon you, and God has anointed you to do and be the good news. Amen.