
The Spirit Of The Lord is Upon Me

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A sermon by Canon Todd Smelser
Third Sunday After the Epiphany

I was a junior in college, Earlham College in Richmond Indiana, a Quaker liberal-arts school. The third generation of my family to attend there, I was a music major, studying violin, voice and the organ. My organ teacher, Mr. Byrd, invited me to be part of a special evening Confirmation service that was scheduled at St. Paul's Church. The Diocese of Haiti was a companion Diocese of the Diocese of Indianapolis, and the Episcopal Bishop of Haiti, Bishop Garnier, was going to be present to confirm candidates and celebrate the Eucharist. I was invited to assist and sing in the choir. When I got to the Church for the rehearsal, however, I soon realized that my teacher wanted me to play most of the service, without much practice might I add. Being a college student, I had strayed quite a bit from the Methodist heritage that I was part of in my youth. I was still in my undecided phase with regards to religion, but as the liturgy unfolded, and I found myself on the bench in the middle of celebration, I think something began to come together not only in my fingers on the keyboard, but in my heart as well. Two years later in my first year of seminary, I came back to St. Paul's Church to be baptized and confirmed. This parish would sponsor me for Ordination, and I would preach my first sermon there. My parents also joined that parish and remained active there until my father's illness. His funeral service would be from there. When I think of my own church home--it is St. Paul's that I think of, and hold in my prayers to this day.

Today's Gospel presents us with Jesus' first act of public ministry in Luke's Gospel. Following his baptism in the Jordan River and his long wilderness fast and temptation, Jesus' returns to his home country Galilee, and to his hometown of Nazareth and to the synagogue where he grew up. It must have been a pretty big day for the community, and everybody was there to see and hear the local boy who had made such a name for himself. Jesus enters the synagogue on that Sabbath morning. Perhaps it looked a little smaller than he remembered, but it was still so familiar. Presumably Mary and Joseph had made sure that their son was raised faithfully in their ancestral religion. Like all of you parents who make the effort and commitment to bring your children here for worship and church school and youth group and communion and confirmation classes, Jesus' parents were probably also very conscientious in the religious raising of their son. They too must have hoped that this preparation would provide a strong basis for a faith that would mature in adulthood, one that would be a firm foundation for every situation, change and crisis that life would present.

So Jesus returns to the Nazareth synagogue, perhaps thankful for his upbringing and support he had received there. He is asked to read a lesson from the prophets. There is no set lectionary for him to follow: the choice is up to him. A bulky scroll is brought to him and placed upon the lectern. Jesus, searching for a familiar text, unrolls it to a place near the end of the scroll. In a voice strong but reserved he begins to read these words:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recover of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Finished with this brief passage, Jesus rolls up the scroll, returns it to the attendant and sits down. Perhaps everyone was looking to Jesus for some commentary for some explanation. Like a Quaker meeting, it was usual for people at Sabbath

worship to make comment on the scripture passage. But on this day everyone was looking at Jesus. But instead of a clever homily in which he tried to say something that everyone would agree with, Jesus announces that today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. In Luke's text there is just silence from the hearers. In Mark and Matthew's account, scripture said that the people felt "foul of him". In other words, who did this smarty-pants prophet think he is. And Jesus replies, "A prophet will always be held in honor except in his home town." So much for local boy makes good!

Fred Craddock in his commentary on Luke notes that "Luke places the Nazareth visit first because it is first, not chronologically but programmatically. That is to say that this even announces who Jesus is, of what his ministry consists, what his church will be and do, and what will be the response to both Jesus and the Church." For Luke, these verses from Isaiah in a sense form Jesus' purpose or mission statement. Jesus said the Gospel was for the poor and oppressed, speaking to those on the margins of society. Jesus was announcing that he came to change structures that oppressed the poor and sick, war captives and political prisoners. Jesus came to institute the year of Jubilee in which crushing debts were forgiven and slaves were freed.

Everything that follows, at least in Luke's Gospel, takes its life and meaning from this passage. This passage from Luke's fourth chapter offers us a sense of the center of this Gospel. Everything that follows in the next three years of Jesus' ministry amounts to his living out this prophecy, and after his baptism, it all started in that worship service in the synagogue. Luke, in the traditions of First and Second Isaiah, de-emphasizes ceremonial displays of righteousness, underscoring acts of human compassion and social justice instead. The primary question is not so much, what does God demand for righteousness? It is rather, who needs attention and compassion? Some people, of course welcome what Jesus says and does. Others get upset because he questions their values, and pushes them into confronting things that are uncomfortable and even scary. Eventually, of course the powers and principalities lead Jesus to Calvary and to his death. But for the believer, for all those who understand the meaning of Isaiah's words, Jesus not only rises from the dead on Easter morning, but vindicates all the promises and hopes that the prophet spoke about.

This ministry of Jesus of course continues, we believe, through his mystical body, the Church. Jesus still brings good news to those who don't have any, sets free those who are in captivity, opens blind eyes, helps the exploited to find new life, and unrolls the floor plan that offers God's reign where justice and peace will prevail. Today's reading from First Corinthians, that wonderful metaphor of the Church as the body, remind us that each of us who are part of the Church have a role to play, and a ministry to fulfill.

The ministry of Jesus continues, because we the members of the Church continue to respond to the promise that the Spirit of the Lord is upon us. The poor gain hope because they can find food at Buckhead Christian Ministry, and get a new home through Habitat for Humanity. The captives experience freedom because they are visited in prison or in a treatment center. The blind receive sight whether its cataract surgery at the church-sponsored hospital or when the scales of prejudice fall from one's eyes. The oppressed are set free, when a breakthrough comes with a therapist at the Counseling Center or when our prayers are finally answered for the oppressed people of Syria. When Jesus reads that passage in the Nazareth synagogue, he announces the mission statement for himself, and for his body, the Church.

St. Paul's Church in Richmond Indiana has been a witness to the faith since its founding in 1837. The community has changed much in the past forty years, and no longer are the pews filled with lots of people. Recently the parish decided that they could no longer afford a full-time rector. Perhaps their glory days are behind them. But every week the faithful gather to be fed at the Eucharist and at pot-luck suppers. The sick are visited and the poor are offered help and clothing. The students at the college are welcomed and the needs of the Church are still prayed for. That church building at the corner of 8th Street and North A is still the home of a congregation who come to worship and to serve, to be Christ's body, the Church in that place. Thanks be to God that the Spirit of the Lord is still with us, for the Lord will show all of us a still more excellent way.

The Spirit of the Lord has anointed us to bring good news to the poor.

The Spirit of the Lord has sent us to proclaim release to the captives.

The Spirit of the Lord has sent us to help the blind recover their sight.

The Spirit of the Lord has sent us to free the oppressed.

The Spirit of the Lord has sent us to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in our hearing. Amen

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