

WESTMINSTER
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CHURCH



SERMON

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The Spirit Is Upon Me

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The number one selling book of all time is the Bible. Let that sink in. The number one selling book of all time, year after year, is the Bible. Last October, a front cover article from the *Wall Street Journal* reported a 22% increase in Bible sales over the prior year, with three months yet to go.

Even though the Bible is available as an app on your phone or via internet free of charge, in all forms of English translations and other languages, people continue to buy a Bible to hold in their hands to read and study.

As someone who reads the bible, I will candidly admit to being intimidated by it at times. The density and foreignness can be so difficult to comprehend. And, I am convicted daily by the message, I hope and pray those who acquire a bible will find a community to read together. Each Bible should come with a warning label: Handle with Care. This will change you.

Another searing fact to consider. Seventy-two percent of Americans profess to be spiritual. Among younger adults that number is even higher.

Put these two facts together. People crave intimacy with God and turn to Holy Scripture. Even when religion appears as irrelevant or, worse yet, toxic, people still sense a divine power stirring within them.

This was also true about culture in the first century.

The writer of Luke's gospel appeals to the people's reverence for scripture by lacing the gospel with direct quotes and allusions to long-trusted prophecy from their ancient texts.

And, the writer infuses the entire narrative as a work of the spirit. The gospel is not some ethereal book of ideas. It testifies to God's changing the world through Jesus.

The incarnation begins as the spirit comes upon Mary. The spirit stirs within her to sing the *Magnificat* – a song of God's promises: her son will show mercy to those who fear him, bring down the powerful, and lift the lowly.

That same spirit descends mightily upon Jesus at his baptism.

It accompanies him during a forty-day period of wandering in the desert. It strengthens Jesus as he wrestles with the temptation to claim earth's splendor or remain true to God.

In our reading for today, which is handed to us by the common lectionary, Jesus is ready to launch his ministry. He turns to the holy scripture, written in scrolls too precious to be bought and sold, as the whole village holds their breath for his inaugural sermon.

Dear God,

Like others before us, we feel your spirit. Give us courage to trust that spirit and your word to guide us. Make it blow through our community and get under our skin. Give us courage to do the work Jesus began and sets before us today. Amen.

Luke 4:14-21

Then Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding region. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom.

He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

"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 recovery of sight to the blind,

to set free those who are oppressed,

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

Then Jesus began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

In Nazareth of Galilee, to a synagogue audience of men, women, leaders, noble folks, the poor, the diseased and possessed, the wealthy, freedpersons, masters, and enslaved, Jesus preaches.

We do not need tone-of-voice markers to imagine that Jesus reads passionately, boldly, and with conviction, bringing the text to life.

He said, “the Spirit of the Lord is upon *me* because he anointed *me* to bring good news to the poor.” Good news is more than merely words to inspire, it is the collective of all the ways he changes life’s circumstances for those who feel held down by the boot of Rome on their throats.

Jesus says, “he has sent *me* to proclaim release to the captives.” No longer will people be enslaved, bought and sold, or unjustly imprisoned at the whims of rulers.

Jesus says, “he has sent *me* to recover sight to the blind.” No longer will people walk around blinded to the reality of God in their midst and the needs of people around them.

Jesus says, “he has sent *me* to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Healing begins with God’s forgiveness.

We should imagine sermon created pin-drop silence as the people listen, transfixed by this carpenter they thought little of. Transfixed by his passion. I imagine transfixed as they questioned if he would or could make good on these words.

It’s hard to notice what’s missing sometimes.

Only the most astute who committed scripture to memory heard him skip part of Isaiah’s plan for the Messiah. Jesus did not claim “and the day of vengeance of our God”. Relying upon the holy spirit, Jesus interprets the ancient scroll to bring good news through healing and justice, not violence or retribution.

Some will say that he left out the juicy parts. That might have raised a few hackles in Nazareth, because they want the leaders to suffer for their abuse. It also might raise a few eyebrows because he is interpreting scripture in a new way. As the reader of this centuries later, we know he foreshadows future sermons.

He will again let the spirit guide him to interpret scripture in the Sermon on Plain as he preaches

Blessed are you who are poor...but woe to you who are rich.

Blessed are you when people hate you, exclude and revile you...woe to you when all speak well of you.

This version of the Beatitudes concludes with “But love your enemies, do good...be merciful, just as your father is merciful.”

Jesus knows that we will not change the world by pacifying the powerful at the expense of everyone else. We will not change the world with hate and fear and violence. We change the world by meeting each and every human soul with love.

That’s the power of his inaugural sermon.

When Jesus finishes teaching, he rolls the scroll up, returns it to the attendant, takes his seat, and with all eyes glued on him. He’s not done. He pushes even further. From the seated posture of authority, he states resolutely and unapologetically, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”.

Two things to know about his final statement.

1. Clearly, Jesus will overthrow the ironbound caste system of oppressing humans. He will incite a grassroots ministry of non-violence.
2. The second is not so obvious. He speaks in the present tense. Let me be a bible geek and explain the verb tense in Greek word describes a durative power.

It could read, “This scripture has been and will continue to be fulfilled.”

Jesus promises to those gathered and to each of us today that the work he begins will extend beyond our lifetimes.

This is just part one of his sermon in Nazareth. Pick up your Bible and continue reading in chapter four or come back next week.

Part two describes the response of the crowd.

The purpose and mission of Jesus' ministry informs the purpose and mission of the church he calls into being.

That church lives on in you and me. So what are we to do to be his body in the world today? Let his life's work teach us.

Pick up a Bible and read what he says. Let the holy spirit animate our reading to pursue bold and creative service since his word demands getting our fingernails dirty doing the hard work of ministry. The more we work as his witness in the world, the more those who buy the bibles and thirst for the presence of the spirit will want to be a part of this community.

When you really think about it, the spirit was the only thing the early church had going for it. No buildings. No budget. No paid staff. And yet, they risked their lives to witness to the gospel.

Consider how richly blessed we are with the diversity of God's creation and the spirit ablaze within us. Imagine what we can do!

His story is just getting started in and through us. The spirit is upon us now.



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