

January 23, 2022
Spirited Voice
Luke 4:14–21

¹⁴ Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

¹⁶ When he 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, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

*¹⁸ "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 let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

²⁰ 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. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Please pray with me. God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking. Amen.

It is all so very clear to me now. Obvious, really. Luke prepares us for it in the way he tells the story of Jesus' birth – with Mary singing her revolutionary song about the hungry being filled with good things – and filthy poor shepherds being the first to receive the good news.

Fast forward, and we meet Jesus as an adult, being baptized by John, and the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus. This is God's beloved, we learn, listen to him. Straight from the water of baptism Jesus faces the testing of wilderness. In that wilderness he is tempted by the idea that his mission and ministry could be about power and control over people. He is confronted with the seductive lie that so much more can be accomplished when you use power and violence and intimidation to control people.

Jesus, strengthened by what he knows to be true about God, withstands the temptation to be like every other tyrant, ruler, bully that has an agenda...because that is not how love works. Love does not trickle down from the top, it swells up from the bottom.

Filled with God's spirit, Jesus begins to teach using words and stories that resonated with outcasts and sinners and the least of the least. People started to notice, and word got around. "You have to go hear him," I can imagine them saying to one another.

By the time Jesus arrives in his hometown of Nazareth, there is a buzz about his growing popularity. His family and friends, the people who watched him grow up, are eager to hear what he has to say – and so are we.

It was Jesus' custom to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath, to hear scripture read and to receive a teaching. Today, he is invited to teach. The scripture reading for the day, whether he picked it, or it was picked for him we are not sure, is from Isaiah. Only Jesus puts his own spin on the reading, leaving out a few words and phrases and weaving in a verse from a different chapter. Jesus excludes language about God's vengeance, and he excludes the mention of Israel and Zion. He then adds a verse from a different chapter about letting the oppressed go free. The oppressed are those who are economically devastated, and freedom is release from indebtedness.

Luke places this story at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and it is clear what he is doing. This moment, this scripture, this teaching is the defining moment of Jesus' ministry. After the reading from Isaiah, Jesus sits down to teach, which is what one did in those days. Rather than elaborating on the scripture reading – Jesus simply says, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Luke 4:18-19, the verses that capture the scripture he read that day, say all that needs to be said about who Jesus is, what he is about, and what he plans to do. It couldn't be clearer. This is Jesus' mission statement.

At first, they are amazed by Jesus and the thought that Joseph's son was becoming so well known. But quickly, the mood changes, when Jesus adds a few final thoughts to his teaching. If you continue this reading in Luke, Jesus goes on to suggest that the good news is not just for those who consider themselves God's elect – but for gentiles as well. The angels, in their announcement to the shepherds, said as much... "this is good news of great joy for **all** people!"

Jesus' hometown crowd violently rejects such a thought. They go from praising him to attempted murder. He escapes with his life... Luke 4:18-19 defines Jesus' ministry, and the rest of the story reveals the hostility and rejection he will face because he dares to love all.

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Is this not the call of every Christian? The Spirit of God anointed Jesus and that same Spirit has anointed us. This is **our** mission statement! Our mission is to look around us and ask, "Who needs attention? Who needs compassion? Who is suffering unjustly? Who is trapped in systems that keep them down?" We are challenged to ask, "What is good news for those who are poor, sick, broken, and without power? What is good news for those who are suffering?" Our mission is to deliver good news...our mission is to be the good news...our job is leave a trail of good news everywhere we go.

So, what happened? When did the purpose of Jesus get hijacked?

When did the message of Christianity start to sound more like the angry mob at Nazareth? When did Jesus become our personal Lord and savior to the exclusion of everyone else?

Father Richard Rohr says it well when he says, "Christianity is a lifestyle—a way of being in the world that is simple, non-violent, shared, and loving. However, we made it into an established "religion" (and all that goes with that) and avoided actually changing lives. One could be warlike, greedy, racist, selfish, and vain in most of Christian history and still believe that Jesus is "personal Lord and Savior." The world has no time for such silliness anymore. The suffering on Earth is too great. Our faith must show real fruit."

And what is the real fruit? How will you know when God is at work and the gospel is proclaimed?

John the Baptist, after he was arrested, was confused by Jesus. He was under the impression that Jesus would be a hell-fire brimstone preacher and teacher like him – but Jesus wasn't like that at all. John, so certain at Jesus' baptism, is now not so certain that he understands the message God wants to send this world. So, he asks. From his prison cell he sends two messengers to Jesus and asks him, "Are you the one or not?" And here is Jesus' reply: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes **no** offense at me." (Luke 7:22-23)

It seems to me there is some serious confusion today about what it means to follow Jesus. Is it about believing the right things or voting the right way? Is it about trying not to be contaminated by people you consider evil? Is it about power and control? Is it about accepting Jesus as your personal savior? Is it all about going to heaven when you die? Is it about your personal prosperity? No, no, no, no, no, no...

Listen to Jesus! It is about leaving a wake of love and compassion wherever you go. When John needed confirmation, Jesus replied with an answer that was unconcerned about titles or beliefs. "Let my life speak," he said. John can decide for himself.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us! God has anointed us! To bring good news to the poor, to heal, to comfort, to set free from oppression and debt. The Spirit of the Lord is upon us! God has anointed us! To comfort, to see, to tend, to love, to welcome, to include, to come alongside in compassion. The Spirit of the Lord is upon us! God has anointed us! To create a community of kindness and ministries of compassion and justice... The Spirit of the Lord is upon us! And God has anointed us to see EVERY person as a beloved child of God and to treat them accordingly.

It seems so obvious! And yet.....there is confusion.

When we let our lives speak...what gospel do they proclaim?

Amen.