

“The Spirit’s Power”
Epiphany 3c
Luke 4:14-21

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In Jesus’ Name.

Luke the gospel writer was very fond of summary statements. His two volumes, the gospel that bears his name and the book of Acts, have a string of them. It makes me wonder if Luke might have been a language arts teacher before his call to ministry. Verses 14 and 15 of our gospel reading today comprise one such summary statement. It serves as a transition from the preceding narrative in which Jesus was tempted in the wilderness by the devil. It locates Jesus in the synagogues of Galilee. In the chapters to come Jesus takes us to church. First and foremost though, the summary statement keeps the spotlight on the Holy Spirit.¹

When Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan the Holy Spirit descended upon him. The same Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. Verse 13 reads, “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.” The devil is gone for now but Jesus is still filled with the power of the Spirit when he returned to Galilee and began to teach in their synagogues. Jesus came to his home town. I knew it was small but not as small as some archeologists say. Two I read about this past week claim it was a “settlement of two to four hundred villagers, representing perhaps a dozen extended families, somewhat off the beaten track....”² Jesus went to synagogue on the Sabbath as was his custom. He stood up to read scripture. The scroll of Isaiah the prophet was handed to him. He read from Isaiah 61:1-2. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” Luke has told us already several times that the Holy Spirit is upon Jesus. Therefore, I think the emphasis in his reading (or singing

¹ Fred B Craddock, *Luke* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 60-61.

² John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Text* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 31-35. As quoted by Kim L Beckmann, *New Proclamation Year C, 2009-2010, Advent Through Holy Week* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 90.

of the text as was their custom) fell on the word me. “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, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Jesus rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant and sat down to comment on the text. He had one comment to make. He kept it short. He said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Up until this point we have heard nothing from Jesus mouth except what he quoted from scripture to the devil in the wilderness and what he read from scripture to the congregation in Nazareth. Otherwise the first word out of his mouth is “Today.”³ “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

The Scripture Jesus read was at least 500 years old. It perhaps came from the time of Nehemiah, our first reading today. The Nehemiah passage recounts the rebuilding of temple and city. They were turned to rubble in 586 BC and the people were taken captive into exile. The exiles came back 50 years later and rebuilt. Nehemiah tells us when they paused in their rebuilding efforts the people wept. They did not all weep with joy. Those who remembered the splendor of Solomon’s temple wept with disappointment. The rebuilt temple was shoddy in comparison to past glory. So they lifted their eyes and looked to an indefinite future when the glory would be restored. Isaiah 61 from which Jesus read was a part of that forward look. In Jesus’ day the forward look was at least 500 years old. And “the year of the Lord’s favor” was the jubilee year when all debts would be forgiven and those in foreclosure would get their property back. The jubilee year would reset the clock so to speak. By Jesus’ day, that promise had been around in scripture for maybe a thousand years. The jubilee was supposed to happen

³ Craddock, 62.

every 50 years. There is no evidence it was ever observed. So, for centuries people were waiting and hoping for these promises to come true. And the little shabby rabbi, the carpenter's son, from a little Podunk town out in the middle of nowhere has the audacity to say, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled."

Full of the Spirit's power Jesus went from the synagogue in Nazareth to the synagogue in Capernaum. A man with an unclean spirit cried out, "Let us alone! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit saying, "Be silent and come out of him. Now," Jesus said. Not later.

From the synagogue Jesus went to Simon Peter's home. Simon's mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever. Jesus rebuked the fever and it left her immediately. Not the next morning, but immediately.

Jesus went to a deserted place to pray. People followed him and would have detained him but he said, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God in the other cities beginning today."

He fed the hungry crowds. He did not say "Come back tomorrow." He did not send them away to buy food for themselves.

Jesus called his first disciples, the fishermen Simon Peter, James and John. They did not say, "We will follow you beginning tomorrow. We have to tie up some loose ends first. We have to make some business arrangements. There are some things we want to do first before we get all serious about this disciple thing. Let us sleep on it. Let us confer with our friends and family about this decision." No immediately they followed him.

Jesus said, “Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the kingdom of God right now.” Jesus taught saying, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” I set you free today from the need to get even.

We have witnessed the importance of today in the cries from the rubble in Haiti. Tomorrow will be too late. Rescue must come today. We see the urgency of the moment in the hungry and thirsty faces of the survivors.

Read through Luke’s gospel beginning with the temptation in the wilderness and we see that Jesus encountered resistance every step of the way. Powerful forces are at work to make today no different from yesterday. They work on the man who has called on the Holy Spirit to help him stay sober today. They work against the woman who has heard the words of forgiveness and clings to the Spirit’s power to believe those words today.

There were eight clergymen in Alabama who wrote an open letter to Martin Luther King, Jr. in which they counseled “Not today. Wait.” In King’s Letter from Birmingham Jail he wrote back, “We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given up by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct-action campaign that was “well timed” in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word “Wait....” This ‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’....”⁴

When Dr. King was assassinated there was a fair amount of unrest in Tampa, FL. The pastor at Zion Lutheran Church in the center part of the city was active in the civil rights movement. He sent out an invitation to the other Lutheran churches in the area to come to Zion on a Sunday afternoon to hear from a civil rights activist, a black civil rights activist with a big

⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 78-79, 82-84. Quoted by Philip H Pfatteicher, *Festivals and Commemorations* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980), 51.

afro. We had quite a large contingent of high school youth present that afternoon. The man was late. The time of the meeting came and went. Ten minutes slipped by, fifteen. Finally he showed up, twenty minutes late. He began his comments saying, "You notice I was late. I see you all looking at your watches. I am late not because I do not have a watch. And my watch has the correct time. It is not because I got tied up at a prior meeting or event. I was not doing anything before coming to this gathering. In fact this meeting is the only thing on my schedule for today. I come late on purpose. You have made us wait for 100 years. I figured you could wait on me for twenty minutes." When the prophet Jeremiah did things like this we call it a symbolic action. So also this man told us in more than words but also with a symbolic action, "Today."

Jesus action was more than a symbol when he hung on a cross between two criminals. One of them said to Jesus, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus said to him, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Jesus had never been out of his kingdom. It went where he went. And now he is going to the grave. Jesus extends the boundary line of God's kingdom all the way there. He descended into hell extending the power of God's kingly rule there.

This is, however, the one time Jesus made us wait. One time Jesus said not today and not tomorrow but the day after. That is the time from his burial to his resurrection from the grave. Some things are worth waiting for. Because of his resurrection we can say "Today."

The power of the Holy Spirit is upon us today. If we doubt it all we have to do is trace our hands through the water of the font. As with Jesus it was with our baptism that the Holy Spirit came upon us. Today our sins are forgiven and we are raised with Christ anew. Today we have the spirit's power to break sins chains. Today in the Lord's Supper God consoles troubled consciences. Today Christ moves among us in the proclaimed Word just as Christ moved among

his friends and neighbors in the Nazareth synagogue. From the Eucharist the great thanksgiving extends into the world with our offerings of ourselves, our time and our possessions, signs today of God's gracious love.