“Ideas Worth Spreading”

Sarah Wolf

Micah 6:6-8

Luke 4:14-21

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“With what shall I come before the Lord,

And bow myself before God on high?,” the people asked.

“Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,

With calves a year old?

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,

With tens of thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,

The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

And the prophet Micah answered,
“He has told you, O mortal, what is good;

And what does the Lord require of you

But to do justice, and to love kindness,

And to walk humbly with your God?”

Luke 4:14-21

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

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, 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 let the oppressed go free,

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 eye of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

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I have been at Covenant for a little over 6 months now and I think that it is no secret that I love words and language and what language can convey. What might appear at first glance as a random, throw-away word, upon deeper investigation turns out to be the one word that completely transforms the meaning of a sentence, a paragraph, or an entire story. I love to take a word and think through all of the possible meanings behind it.

For example, did you know this is a complete sentence?

Buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo.

That sentence is grammatically correct in English. The word “buffalo” has multiple meanings and can be different parts of speech and so it can be used in a sentence in this way. Please don’t spend the next fifteen or so minutes trying to break that sentence down. I will be happy to explain it to you after the service.

There can be a lot of meaning hidden in words and if we take the time to parse those meanings, we often gain a deeper understanding of things.

We see that in the very first word of our text from Luke today. “Then.” Like the Roman god Janus, who has two faces in order to look forward and back, the word “then” makes us ask ourselves at least two questions, “then what?” Or, “What came before then?” That second question is the one we need to explore.

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. What happened before Jesus returned to Galilee?

A couple of things.

One, is that Jesus was baptized in the Jordan. Luke tells us that when Jesus was baptized and was praying, “the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.”

Immediately after Jesus was baptized, comes Jesus’s temptation in the wilderness. Luke describes this transition by saying, “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness.”

Following the temptation and successful denial of all the things that the devil could offer him, we get to today’s text, which begins with this sentence: “Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee.”

There’s a lot packed into that little word - “then.” This story isn’t just another in a long list of stories about Jesus. It’s a continuation of a theme that is very important to Luke — the Holy Spirit is present with Christ in all that he has done, in all that he is doing, and in all that he will do.

The Holy Spirit is present in Jesus’s baptism. The Holy Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness; and now the Holy Spirit is empowering Jesus as he begins to teach in the synagogues. It is important for Luke to communicate to us that in all that Jesus does, the Spirit “claims, tests, and empowers Jesus for the ministry that lies before him.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

And how does the Spirit empower Jesus as he sits in the synagogue in today’s story?

When today’s story begins, we learn that Jesus has made it a habit to travel to different synagogues in Galilee and to teach in them. The text tells us that he has been praised by everyone in all the places he’s been. But then he goes back to his hometown of Nazareth.

He stands up to read and is given the scroll from Isaiah. He unrolls the scroll and finds the passage he is looking for and proclaims:

“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.”

Then Jesus rolls the scroll back up, hands it to the attendant and sits down. It was the custom back in Jesus’s day, for the person preaching or teaching to do so sitting down. I thought about doing that today, but I figured you can already see so little of me when I stand at the pulpit, that it probably wouldn’t be the best idea.

So Jesus sits down and begins to teach. The eyes of all in the synagogue are fixed on him. He begins his sermon or his lesson by saying, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

We don’t know what else Jesus said that day. We don’t know how long he taught. But what we do know is that he astonished the people in the synagogue that day, both with his selection of the text from Isaiah and from his bold proclamation that the text from Isaiah had been fulfilled in their hearing.

In just a few verses from Isaiah and with his statement at the end of today’s lectionary text, Jesus provides the synagogue, Luke’s readers, and Christians today with his keynote address.

What has Jesus come to do?

Bring good news to the poor.

Proclaim release to the captives.

Recovery of sight to the blind.

Let the oppressed go free.

Proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

This is Jesus’s mission statement.

The account of Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth occurs in the other two Synoptic Gospels, but Luke is unique in placing it very early in Jesus’s ministry. The other two place it later on.

In Mark, Jesus goes to the synagogue in his hometown after he’s already established himself as a healer. He shows up in the synagogue after ridding the Gerasene Demoniac of his demons, healing the hemorrhaging woman, and restoring Jairus’s daughter to life.

And in Matthew, Jesus’s visit to the synagogue in Nazareth occurs after he’s spent a day teaching in parables. Both Matthew and Mark place this text around Jesus’s teaching and healing, perhaps as way to remind us that while Jesus may return to his home synagogue as Jesus, the carpenter’s son in the eyes of the townspeople, he is still Jesus the great teacher, and healer, and worker of miracles — the Son of God.

Luke sets out on his own path and places this story at the beginning of Jesus’s ministry.

For Luke, this passage that Jesus reads and proclaims is central to the Gospel — to the good news. If this is Jesus’s mission statement, then everything that he does, should reflect that text from Isaiah.

And it does! We can go through Jesus’s ministry, point by point, and see him actively working to bring good news to the oppressed, working to release people who are in debt to sickness or sin, and working to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

The beauty of Luke’s gospel is that we see this mission statement first made by Jesus and enacted by Jesus in the gospel account, but then we see the first Christians also adopting it as their mission statement as well. Sure, they mess up a time or two, but in all that they do, as they go about setting up this new movement, it is the love of God in Christ set forth in this mission statement to which they keep returning.

Ted Talks have been around since 1984 and continue to grow in popularity. Originally intended to be centered around technology and design, the talks have grown to include topics on science and culture. They are presented by people that are known throughout the world, and also by people who are relative unknowns, but who have something important to share. Ted Talks typically last only about 20 minutes, but are packed full of thought-provoking conversation and inspiring and motivational pushes. The slogan behind Ted Talks is, “Ideas Worth Spreading.”

This scene in the synagogue is Christ’s version of a Ted Talk. And as we read in the book of Acts and in Paul’s Epistles and in the early mothers and fathers of the Christian faith and as we remember and celebrate the hard work of those women and men who sought to start a church on the north end of town, as we remember these beloved stories, we can see Christ’s ideas worth spreading at work.

On her website, artist and author Jan Richardson tells of twin sisters who lived in Scotland in the 19th century. Agnes and Margaret were an unusual pair in that they were both scholars and academics in a time when few women were pursuing that path. They traveled to Egypt to visit St. Catherine’s Monastery, which was established in the 6th century and was well-known for holding some of the earliest documents in the Christian tradition.

While there, Agnes was given a “a thick volume, whose leaves had evidently been unturned for centuries, as they could be separated only by manipulation with the fingers…” In some cases, they had to separate the leaves with a steam kettle.

Agnes realized the book was a palimpsest. A palimpsest is a manuscript which had writing that had been erased or scratched off, and then a new text written over it. This was a common practice when materials were scarce.

Richardson writes, “Looking closer, [Agnes] saw that the more recent text was, as she described, ‘a very entertaining account of the lives of women saints.’ Thecla, Eugenia, Euphrosyne, Drusis, Barbara, Euphemia, Sophia, Justa, and others: women revered in Eastern Christianity, these were among the desert mothers, women of the early centuries of the church who gave up safety, security, convention, and finally their lives in order to follow Christ.

Looking closer still, beneath the stories of these women saints, [Agnes] recognized that the more ancient writing [that had been erased or scratched out to make room for new writing] belonged to the gospels. The manuscript proved to be what was then the oldest Syriac version of the four gospels, dating to the fourth century. It was a stunning discovery.”

Reading about the palimpsest, Richardson thought back to today’s lectionary text and about the connection between Jesus’s first teaching in this particular synagogue and the early desert mothers, and our lives today. She writes that, “the pages of the manuscript, with their layers of text, make visible what happened in the lives of these women of the early church. By their devotion, by their dedication to preserving and proclaiming the gospel message, the desert mothers became living palimpsests, the story of Christ shimmering through the sacred text of their own lives, the Word of God fulfilled in them.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

Friends, we are called to be living palimpsests. I know that’s a hard word to pronounce for a lot of us, let alone to live.

But the good news is, we do not do this hard work alone.

We have to go back to that little word that began this passage. Then.

Because we remember that the same Spirit which descended upon Jesus at his baptism and anointed him to be the Messiah, the same Spirit that led Jesus into the wilderness and was with him through his temptation, the same Spirit that was with Jesus while he was teaching in the synagogues, and the same Spirit that came down upon those early followers at Pentecost, is the same Spirit that continues to push and prod and to call and confront us as we strive to remember and share Christ’s message of liberation from and freedom for.

We are invited to join Jesus’s mission statement today. We are invited to be the next part of the “then” cycle.

And with the Spirit’s help, may we all rise to the occasion.

All praise be to God.

Amen.

We thank you, O God, that through Word and Sacrament, you have given us your Son, who is the true bread from heaven and food of eternal life. So strengthen us in your service that our daily living may show our thanks;

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Friends, Christ calls us to be living palimpsests. We are to continue to tell the story of the Gospel with our lives. This may sound like a truly impossible task, but the good news is we do not do this alone. The same Spirit who accompanied Jesus in the wilderness and throughout his ministry, accompanies us today.

And as you go, know that you take with you the love of God. Take time to dance and sing to the song of the Holy Spirit, and be sure to befriend the Christ in each person that you meet.

1. Feasting on the Word; Robert Brearly [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. http://paintedprayerbook.com/2010/01/19/epiphany-3-fulfilled-in-your-hearing/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)