

# “Where the Spirit Rests”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – January 23, 2022

Luke 4:14-21

There are a few passages in the Bible that can stand on their own. We had one on Christmas Eve when we read, *“THE LIGHT HAS SHINED IN THE DARKNESS, AND THE DARKNESS HAS NOT OVERCOME IT.”* And for once we have the good sense to simply stand with candles shining in a dark room and remain silent. At a funeral we read, *“I AM CONVINCED THAT NEITHER DEATH NOR LIFE, NOR ANGELS NOR RULERS, NOT THINGS PRESENT, NOR THINGS TO COME, NOR POWERS, NOR HEIGHT, NOR DEPTH, NOR ANYTHING ELSE IN ALL OF CREATION WILL BE ABLE TO SEPARATE US FROM THE LOVE OF GOD IN CHRIST JESUS OUR LORD.”* We don’t preach on that; we simply say, “It’s true, in your grief, in your struggle; it’s true now.”

From the prophet Isaiah, which Jesus quoted in this morning lesson: *“THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE HAS ANOINTED ME TO BRING GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR, TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, AND LET THE OPPRESSED GO FREE, TO PROCLAIM THE YEAR OF THE LORD’S FAVOR.”* You can’t really preach on that. Jesus tried, and look what happened to him. He came into town as a local celebrity hometown boy made it big! Everyone was saying good things about him. By the time he was finished, his congregation ran him out of town and practically killed him.

In many places around the world, these words from Luke and Isaiah have become a matter of life and death: freedom for oppressed and release to captives are words of revolution. These are words at the very heart of the gospel, so close to the core that there is really nothing more to say. Jesus said, *“TODAY THIS SCRIPTURE HAS BEEN FULFILLED IN YOUR HEARING.”* We can only affirm. “Yes, this is the work of the Spirit, here, now, among us too!” Then we must stand silent and feel its power.

But most preachers can't stop at that. We want to say something not just to fill up the time, but to help us hear these words on this particular day. It helps if we think about who heard them first. Isaiah first spoke these words to a people who had lost everything they had. They had been taken prisoners of war and sent into exile. They had seen the destruction of their hometowns and holy places. They had lost their loved ones and their heritage of generations before them. After years of grieving, the prophet spoke, "*THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, TO BRING GOOD NEWS.*" The prophet spoke of comfort. He said they would have a reason to laugh rather than cry. They would finally rebuild the destroyed cities. The people wouldn't feel like weeds that grow up everywhere, or saplings that die in the storm. They would be mighty oaks, deep-rooted, strong, and permanent.

Then Jesus came along, years later, and claimed these words for himself. He addressed people he knew all his life. He knew how they struggled under Roman rule. He knew their hopes and disappointments, their poverty, their illnesses, their struggle to be faithful. He dared to say that today, as they listened to him reading, the bold words of Isaiah, were coming to pass. Can you imagine how good words like that sounded?

To the hostage, "You'll be going home soon." To the homeless family, "Here, this is where you can live, for a long time." To the people who had grieved for so much for so long, "Your life will be full of joy."

There wasn't a more important message. The specifics have changed, but people still live in prisons some live in prisons of silence, some of shame. Some live in jails because they have committed crimes, or because they have disagreed with those in power. How they need to hear a word of freedom.

People still are broken hearted. They mourn the deaths of the people they love. They mourn the loss of good work to do; they mourn their dreams that may never be realized. How they need comfort and hope.

And the world still lies in ruins. From destroyed cities to polluted rivers, how our world needs to be rebuilt. We still need to hear a message of hope!

Christ came not to be ministered unto, but to minister to the needs of others. The body of Christ exists **not** to be ministered unto, but to minister to others. When Jesus says that the scriptures have been fulfilled today, He is speaking not only of His own ministry in Palestine 2,000 years ago; but He is speaking of the ministry of His Body in every age and every time.

We can rail against it; we can complain and whine and carry on; we can even choose not to participate in that ministry because we have free will. But there are rules and one of the rules is that we aren't members of Christ's church only when it is convenient, such as on Sunday mornings. We are members of the body of Christ from the moment of our birth to the moment of our death when, presumably, we go on to some even greater work.

David Buttrick, professor of Homiletics and Worship at Vanderbilt University says this: As long as we can hear the Gospel as a noble idealism, we can postpone the future and live now in a wallow of "middle principles." But "today" is a terrifying word; it forces tomorrow's dream on us before we are ready.

There is no future, there is only now. When we are born, our heart and lungs and brain don't get a few years to "get ready" to go to work. They start now, immediately, or we don't start at all. Likewise, Christ's Body, the church is not an abstract concept waiting for us to decide to take part, so that, it can come into being in the future. It's already here now, trying to live, trying to breathe, struggling to survive, and yearning to fulfill its purpose, which is "to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, and to set at liberty those who are oppressed."

Christ has no body but the one of which we are a part. God has no tongue, no arms, no hands, no feet, no heart but yours and mind. We are part of a body, a community, so that we can act with integrity and with power. We are creatures of time so that we can learn that now is all we have. The work of freeing the oppressed, proclaiming good news, release to the captives is our work, today; the work of teaching, preaching, prophesying, administering, loving, healing in the name of God is our work, today; we are the instruments with which God has to do that work. We are the channels of God's grace for the poor, the needy, the disenfranchised, the oppressed, the hungry, the naked and lonely.

The church does not ask for some share of our time and energy as if its portion was anything less than all. God is not going to stop asking for everything we have and everything we are. Christ isn't going to stop asking. The people who fill pulpits in generations to come aren't going to stop asking because God hasn't stopped asking. Your job is to let the Spirit rest on you, as it did on Jesus, and to help us listen and remember the most important message of all, that these words are being fulfilled here, now, for us and all people.

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Amen.