

“What is the Boldest Claim You Ever Made?”

Luke 4:14-21

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I wonder if someone put a sign on the outskirts of the city that said, “Welcome to Nazareth: Home of Rabbi Jesus.” In small towns, people do that when one of their citizens makes it big.

“Welcome to Plains: Home of Jimmy Carter, the Thirty-ninth President of the United States of America.”

“Welcome to Bonaire: Home of Governor Sonny Perdue.”

Even the small place I grew up in proudly welcomes people to the home of the Everly Brothers and Merle Travis. Streets are named after them, too.

Perhaps someone in Nazareth printed Jesus’ name on a homemade sign and posted it on the roadside. After all, Jesus was famous for his ability to teach and perform miracles and the roads leading through Nazareth were heavily traveled. Three million people lived in the Galilean region and Nazareth was a major crossroads for travelers. I would not be surprised at all if someone posted a sign along the way informing pilgrims of Nazareth’s favorite son.

I would also not be surprised if someone tore that sign down while the crowd made their way out of the synagogue to stone Jesus. They weren’t too proud of him the day he implied that God was far more loving and inclusive than they were. I would be willing to say that sign came down.

In today’s text, Jesus has made his way back to his hometown of Nazareth after his baptism and wilderness experience. While Matthew and Mark placed this story later in Jesus’ ministry, Luke put it at the beginning of his public ministry and used it to introduce his readers to Jesus.

As was his custom, Jesus went to worship in the synagogue that he attended many times as a child and young adult. On this particular day, he was one of the readers and read from the prophet Isaiah.

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened upon him and he began by saying to them, ‘Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing’ ” Luke 4:18-21.

Luke tells us that everyone was impressed with his eloquence, but they were somewhat surprised. After all, he did grow up in Nazareth and was one of them. No doubt they were wondering how he got so smart and capable. No carpenter’s son had ever achieved this level of distinction. Familiarity has a way of lowering expectations, doesn’t it?

This morning I do not wish to discuss the favorable or unfavorable reaction of the people to Jesus’ words in the synagogue that day. This is a topic for another sermon. Instead, I want to focus upon the words that Jesus read from Isaiah that were used to identify him and his mission. The very first words he spoke intrigue me. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.”

How do you know when the Spirit of the Lord is upon you? Evidently Jesus believed the Spirit was upon him and rightly so. He felt the Spirit at his baptism and during his time of temptation in the wilderness. According to Mark, Jesus had already begun teaching and healing under the direction and power of the Spirit. The Spirit of the Lord was upon Jesus as he boldly acknowledged that day in the synagogue. How do we know, though, when the Spirit of the Lord is upon us? Let me share some ideas for you to consider.

We know the spirit of the Lord is upon us when we are able to see what others ignore or overlook. When we are able to see beyond our own needs, desires and wants to others' plight, we know the hand of God is upon us.

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the **poor**. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the **prisoners** and recovery of sight for the **blind**, to release the **oppressed**, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

I find it interesting that Jesus did not say, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because I have been blessed with abundant resources, good health, widespread notoriety, a faithful mate, intelligent children, a good job or a fine home." These are wonderful blessings, for which we need to be grateful, but I know people that have all of these and are as far from the Lord as anyone can be. On the other hand, I know others that have none of these things and are very close to the Lord.

The first evidence of the Spirit of God upon someone, according to Isaiah and Jesus, is the awareness of others' needs. God's story is always related to human need. His heart aches for those that are oppressed, "broken to bits" by the harshness of life. His eyes are upon the poor, sick, lame, hungry, confined, confused, lonely and disenfranchised. When our eyes are, too, then we are looking in the same direction God is and His Spirit is close.

Listen to the words of Edward Markquart. "It is interesting to me that Jesus' self-understanding comes primary from the Old Testament book of Isaiah, especially chapters 58 and 61. If you are going to understand who Jesus is, you have to read these two chapters. In his first sermon, Jesus did not imply that he was going to be like King David with lots of power. He did not imply that he was going to be like King Solomon with lots of wealth. He didn't imply that he was going to be a military leader like Joshua. Rather, Jesus chose Isaiah 58 and 61 and said, 'I am going to be a servant. I am going to take care of the poor and heal the blind, the lame and the maimed.' "

Continuing, Markquart writes, "Remember when John the Baptist sent messengers to ask Jesus if he was the Messiah. Do you recall what Jesus said? 'Tell John that the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the poor have good news preached to them.' That's what Jesus told John was the core of his ministry."

This should be the core of our ministry, too. When it is, the Spirit of God will be upon us as it was him.

Secondly, the Spirit of the Lord is upon us when we are burdened by what we see. When the needs of others make us restless, the Spirit is nearby.

I've never been the same after my first mission trip twenty years ago. I went to the beautiful land of Kenya. A small portion of my time was spent in the capital, Nairobi. It was there that I saw abject poverty for the first time. I looked at row after row of cardboard shacks filled with children and adults that had absolutely nothing. The number of deaths each day had to be staggering. The amount of violence had to be overwhelming. The level of pain and suffering had to be immeasurable.

I've seen poverty in many places since, both at home and abroad, and it disturbs me each time. This is one reason I have dedicated my ministry to mobilizing people to "Give themselves away." This is our noblest calling and this text confirms it.

Thirdly, the Spirit of the Lord is upon us when we see the gifts God has given us that can be used to alleviate pain and suffering. One of our readings today focused attention upon Paul's letter to the Corinthians. In I Corinthians 12:12-31, Paul told his readers about spiritual gifts. According to Paul, each person has been given talents that can be used to make the world better. When skills are used for this purpose, they become spiritual gifts, blessed by God and used for His purposes. According to [Klesis: God's Call and the Journey of Faith](#), ministry occurs anytime we become the presence of Christ in someone's life. When we engage in ministry, the Spirit is always close.

Fourthly, the Spirit of God is upon us when we accept intimidating challenges that overwhelm us. The challenge Jesus accepted that day in the synagogue was big even for him. To preach good news to the poor, set the captives free, heal the blind and release the oppressed was no small order. Any one challenge was more than most people would tackle, much less all four.

When the Spirit of the Lord is upon you, you don't take the easy road, but the necessary one. With each step, you rely upon Him for wisdom, guidance, strength and power just as Jesus did.

Do not overlook the significance of the Spirit in Jesus' life. He knew this challenge was bigger than one man could accomplish. The needs were overwhelming and the resistance, which he would encounter from his own neighbors, would be intimidating. He had to have help and Luke tells us where he found it. He relied upon God.

Luke stresses the importance of the Spirit in the early days of Jesus' ministry. The Spirit descended upon him at his baptism. He was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested. He returns in the power of the Spirit from the wilderness after successfully resisting temptation. The first words he chose to speak in his inaugural address were, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me."

As Bill Long writes, "Just as Jesus was wrapped in swaddling clothes at his birth, now he is wrapped in the Spirit as he begins his ministry." This was the secret of his success. It will be the secret of ours, too, and the confirmation of His presence in our lives.

Have you ever felt the Spirit of the Lord upon you? Would you like to? Proclaim hope to those in despair. Assume the role of a servant. Become the presence of Christ in a broken world and you will be able to make the same bold claim Jesus did that day in his hometown.