

Luke 3:18-26

The Force

That last name I read, in verse 26, Joda (or Yoda), brought to me a remembrance from long ago, and made me recall a galaxy far, far away. Actually, it was in Austin, where I saw the first Star Wars movie; and the year was 1977. And a few days ago I saw the latest one. If you have not seen it, it does bring back some old characters, and introduces some new ones who take the story in a new direction. I'll admit, I was a bit disappointed in the movie as a work of art- it sometimes seemed just an excuse for humans and alien creatures to fight with lasers and light sabers, and fly exotic space vehicles, and blow things up as loud and big as they could. But I must also say this: it continues the story, with a new generation taking over. And that is an important point to make, that every few years a new generation will become the leaders of nations and movements. Like that moment near the end of the movie, in Carrie Fisher's last scene- Princess Leia, that is- as she is speaking to the new, young heroine and saying good-bye in the Star Wars way, "May the Force be with you." Passing the torch, as it were.

So here is what I want to say about the Force, that it is present in this scripture: God's Spirit is a great force that descends upon Jesus. Of course, God's Spirit is not the same as the Force in the universe of Star Wars, but the Spirit is

God's power and presence, and the supreme force in our universe. And it changes everything, as it moves and descends and operates. It utterly changes Jesus' life, and takes him in a different direction. I don't know what he expected his life to be; maybe he hoped to be a small town carpenter or craftsman all his life; certainly devout in his commitment to God, maybe he thought being a disciple of John the Baptist would supply him with answers to his spiritual questions. But John was put away in prison, and then, this strange event that afternoon, the clouds parting, the voice, the dove, and the words "You are my Beloved Son; I am pleased with you" coming out of the sky. This Force must have filled him- with what, with strength, religious fervor, with courage and spiritual insight? Yes, it seems so, as we keep reading the story. And it took him to places he hadn't planned on going: in chapter 4 the Spirit led him into the wilderness to be tempted. (We might note that in Mark's telling of the story, the Spirit *drove* him into the wilderness.) Make no mistake, it was a mighty force, so that at the end of the gospel- just before he ascends into heaven- Jesus tells the disciples to remain in Jerusalem until the "*power* from on high" comes upon them. It was the Force, that was coming just days later on that remarkable Pentecost, when the Spirit descended with fire and wind and noise, and faith and conversion.

Our passage describes one of those immutable “fulcrum points” in religious history, in Jewish and Christian history, God’s history in the world, however we want to name it: it is Jesus’ very own conversion experience. And the Force is the instigator of it. There are three divisions in this short passage, with the Spirit at the center of it all. First, there is John the Baptist, and his teaching in the verses preceding, that show us the true meaning of God’s Law, but now his disappearance from the scene; Jesus, and the scripture’s focus on him- just a man in the crowd, but now called God’s Son, the Spirit and the start of something new- verse 23, “Jesus began his ministry”; and third, oddly, the genealogy, which breaks into the narrative and interrupts this compelling story of Jesus with a list of almost meaningless names. Not totally meaningless, though- the author has some theological purpose in mind.

Because this is what the genealogy does. All these names- that go back to the first father, Adam, in the last verse of the chapter- and they make us realize that God had been planning this moment for a long time; had been preparing a people for a long time; had been leading up to this day to proclaim this man as God’s son. Jesus- who is called Beloved Son in verse 22, and who begins his ministry in verse 23- is, in the gospels, the culmination of human history, that he might bring back

creation and all creatures into favor with God. The genealogy tells us this. And it shows us this, as well: it connects Jesus to all of us. Jesus is called not just Son of God, but Son of Joseph, too, and then it's "son of" this man, and "son of" that man, all the way to Adam, who is also called, "Son of God." So yes, Jesus is the Beloved Son, and the Force rests on him; but we are Adam's children, too, and thus, sons and daughters of God. We are so closely related to Jesus; God's children, every one of us: every race, every color, both sexes, and every gender-confused person; and people of every religion looking for God. It is imperative that we believe that we all are God's children, either that, or else believe that only these Semites named in chapter 3 are sons of God. But the gospel's message is that we all are God's children, and sisters and brothers to one another. The genealogy proves it.

I considered this title for the sermon, "Jesus Began His Ministry," because according to the gospels, this is the turning point in God's history with human beings: the Spirit's descent upon Jesus and his ministry that starts at this very moment. But we need to be careful, and must not consider as unimportant the years and centuries that came before; the religious thought and the inspired writings- the Torah and hymns and psalms, God's prophets and the generations of

believers that listened for and sought after and followed God. These are not insignificant, and John the Baptist, in the first half of chapter 3, represents them all. For how long had God spoken to humankind, how long provided for the people of God, and joined with them in a covenant of hopefulness and peace, and passed down that beautiful and perfect Law? No, we cannot simply neglect that past. John the Baptist, and then Jesus the Messiah, came to teach and prove to us the true meaning of God's Law: that it is loving and sharing and joy, and communication and communion with God, that it is receiving- with gladness, but sometimes with fear- God's Spirit, that will descend upon us as well, and make us God's children, and God's people; doing God's will, following our Lord and obeying our God for the sake of brothers and sisters- who are all around us, but some of them we do not yet know. Let us look for them, that we may share with them the peace and love of God.

When Mark and Matthew retell the baptism story of Jesus, they have it that Jesus came up out of the water, and immediately the heavens split open, and the Spirit descended, and the voice spoke. Here in Luke it is quite different; everything moves slower- notice the passive voice: all the people were baptized; Jesus had

been baptized; and was praying; the heavens were opened. And then the forceful Spirit of God acted. Something unexpected and powerful happened. Perhaps the first thing we are to take from this is that God doesn't sit still; that the great and mighty one still moves among us, and acts on our behalf; and still loves- the voice comes out of the sky, Jesus isn't just the Son, he is "Beloved Son"; and then, the voice assures us that God still looks for those with whom to share his pleasure.

And maybe our scripture tells us this. That we need to be patient sometimes. Look, here is Jesus praying, and heaven opens up for him, and God's Spirit descends. Let it be that way for us: trusting God, believing that the answer will come- that however long the answer takes and whatever that answer may be- God will be with us. So the most desired wish for ourselves and for one another, is also God's perfect assurance: God's promise that the Force will be with you.