

## **“The Spirit of the Lord”**

27 January 2019: 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany

Salado UMC—Salado, Texas 76571

Preaching Text: Luke 4:14-21

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**“When I am abroad,  
I always make it a rule never to criticize  
or attack the government of my own country.  
I make up for lost time when I come home”**

*(Sir Winston Churchill, 1874 - 1965).*

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Do you remember the first time you went back to your high school after graduation? Many people come back to see how the school and the people are doing without them, usually the first year they are “out in the world.” I remember the first time I went back to my high school after graduation—at Thanksgiving from SMU.

What amazed me was that no one seemed surprised to see me. I left and no one noticed—or even noticed that I was back. Of course, I went to a large urban high school with 800+ in our freshman class, although only 536 in fact graduated. Large high schools, I realize, are chiefly impersonal institutions. Yet, one would think that someone, anyone, would pay a bit of individual special attention to such a distinguished alumnus. Despite that, the special attention I received upon my return was a few former teachers ever so slightly raised an eyebrow. One asked if I could come back later when she was not so busy—say, next summer. Coming home is rarely how we anticipated it. In Luke’s story of Jesus’ homecoming, however, it was not Jesus who was in for a big surprise. It was all the other people!

The devil [or the Satan, *ha-satan*, or the adversary] tempted Jesus in the wilderness, as you remember from Luke’s Gospel. The temptations were to misapply Jesus’ divine power for personal benefit, for worldly command, and for protection from God’s ultimate plan fulfilled in the Messiah and by way of the cross.

Returning to Galilee, Jesus, as was his custom, attends synagogue services, no doubt, with the extended family. The synagogue leaders ask Jesus to read the scripture and to present the morning message. Perhaps this was the Jewish version of our United Methodist Youth Day.

Luke tells us who Jesus is as Luke tells the story of the young thirty-year-old Jesus reading a text from the prophet Isaiah. Luke establishes Jesus as a continuation of God’s promise to Israel. Luke portrays Jesus as a gifted teacher with recognizable authority as he instructs people about God’s plan. Luke emphasizes, in verses 18-19, that Jesus’ mission is to the “poor,” whether they are poor financially, spiritually, or physically. “The year of the Lord’s favor,” refers to the Jewish Jubilee year. Every fifty years Israel forgives all debts and freed all slaves. Leviticus 25:10-11 declares: “Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each of you is to return to your family property and to your own clan. The fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you . . . .”

Jesus, in his sermon that day in the Nazareth synagogue, applies these verses to himself. He will carry out the undertaking of the people’s expectation of Messiah, but certainly not in the way the people expected. After his stellar moment at the lectern (a stand used to support a book or script in a convenient position

for a standing reader or speaker), Jesus sits down to interpret the scripture from which Jesus has read. Jesus says that God's plan is now coming to fulfillment. Hear the account as Luke told it:

**14 Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. 15 He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.**

**16 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, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:**

**18 "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,  
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."**

**20 And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:14-20).**

1. An ordinary day in the synagogue becomes an extraordinary day when Jesus comes to town. Ordinary synagogue worship practices included the following elements: (1) recitation of the Shema (Deut. 6:4-9; 11:13-21; Num. 15:37-41); (2) praying while facing Jerusalem; (3) the "amen" response from the gathered congregation; (4) reading from sections of the Torah scrolls and the Prophets; (5) a sermon; and (6) benediction. Any male could volunteer or asked to pray or read portions from the Torah or the Prophets. Likewise, the synagogue deemed any male fit to offer the sermon (Acts 13:15, 42; 14:1; 17:2). Before the service leaders appointed readers (Linda Mckinnish Bridges, *Feasting on the Word*).

What Jesus quotes from Isaiah's prophecy is the content of the good news of the gospel. It explicitly reveals God's promise to God's people. It is what God wants for God's people. This is what it sounds like when Jesus reads Isaiah's promise:

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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."**

According to Luke, this is the gospel's good news—a promise from God, through Jesus as the Christ, and finally to God's people.

2. Just having the promise, however, is not enough. People have lived under the promises of God for centuries and yet many people still live in misery, poverty, blindness, and in spiritual sickness. We need not only to possess the gospel's proclamation of good news. There is more to the promise of God than that.

One day Benjamin Franklin was giving a speech about the significance of the Constitution of the United States. As the story goes, a man in the crowd rudely pushed his way to the front and interrupted Franklin by shouting, "The Constitution means nothing to us. It states that we are guaranteed happiness . . . where is all the happiness it insures?" Franklin smiled and said, "My friend, the Constitution only guarantees you the right to pursue happiness. You have to catch it yourself."

3. How does one possess the promise is a good question. For those who heard Jesus, the answer was that Jesus himself embodied the promises of God. To those who knew him as a child, that prospect seemed dim indeed. Perhaps, in some ways the intervening centuries have given us a better perspective about who Jesus is and why he has come. This much I know: living the promise of God is possessing the promise of God. It is just both this simple and this difficult.

I once read a story about a foot bridge which spans Welland River just before it empties into the Niagara River and heads toward the great falls. At the point of the footbridge, the river is calmer and more navigable. But danger lurks. So, there is a sign affixed to the posts of the bridge intended for boaters who navigate under it to read and heed. It asks only two questions:

- 1) Do you have an anchor?
- 2) Do you know how to use it?

I know no two better questions to ask yourself today. Do you have an anchor in your life? Do you know how to use it? People today want to make the gospel relevant to life. Perhaps, we would do well to make our lives relevant to the gospel. Amen.

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