

Year C, 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany  
January 27th, 2019  
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Luke 4:14-21

### **With Every Eye Fixed on Him**

In Luke's gospel Jesus is baptized and the Spirit calls him into the wilderness where he is tempted by Satan. We will explore that scene on the first Sunday in Lent.

The story today begins with "Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee." Returned from where? Returned from the wilderness! He has been in the wilderness for forty days wrestling with the voices in his head that tell him to do what everyone else does and fit in, and the quieter voice from God calling him to a deeper life. Having chosen the deeper life, Jesus wants to communicate his Father's love in a way that humankind can see, feel and through which they will be set free. Only when the human species understands the depth of their Father's love will Satan's power, that power which uses violence to control violence and sets humans against each other be broken. And so "in the power of the Spirit" he returns to Galilee.

Jesus returns to civilization. His peers and elders see him. News about him spreads throughout the whole countryside. He has been missing but now he is back! Everyone wonders what has happened to him. They have been talking about him. Nobody knew where he went or why he left. But he's back now. Curiosity grips them and when they hear that he would be going to the synagogue, as was his custom, they all show up.

We don't know what he taught but we know he came back with a message everyone liked. "Under the power of the Spirit" means his message wasn't rooted in human wisdom, politics as usual or popular group-think. His message was tuned to an outside source, a source beyond the gravitational field of the human muddle. On first hearing everyone was drawn to it. It seemed so fresh and vigorous. They had not yet realized that his message would have implications with which they, too, would have to struggle.

It has been my experience that Jesus' message often pulls us into our own wilderness when we dare embrace it. Jesus had the Spirit because he had just gone through that and come out the other side.

Now he moves from the general region of Galilee to Nazareth, the humble village up in the hills in which he grew up. He returns to the community that formed him, that lives in him, and begins his work there. Surely they will embrace his teaching. They will understand what he is doing and support him since his only desire is to set them free. That's his dream, to set them free. He knows their oppression and has a vision for their deliverance.

Luke writes, "On the Sabbath he went to the synagogue (in Nazareth) as he normally did and stood up to read." He has been speaking in other synagogues in Galilee and now he is in his home town. Luke presents Jesus as a faithful young Jew who went to the synagogue, the center of their cultural life, the place where people discuss ideas, debate, find comfort, and ground themselves in their local and Jewish identity. He is not antireligious though I suspect he hopes his Spirit-empowered message will liberate them from the human bondage that goes with dividing the world in to "us" and "them" as religion often does. Even the little synagogue in Nazareth needed deliverance from that as we will soon see.

I suppose he could have gone to the synagogue and not stood up. His standing up drew the bearer of the scroll to him. As a Jewish male in good standing he was entitled to read the text out loud. Apparently he could read. In Luke this is the first public statement declaring his understanding of what he is doing. With this statement his ministry begins.

"The synagogue assistant gave him the scroll from the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written." I stop here because I want you to sense the drama in this. He has the whole scroll in his hands. Which section will he read?

The people in the Synagogue have heard Isaiah read so many times they practically know it by heart. Will Jesus read a section that sheds some light on what happened during those weeks when he went missing? Will he have something to say about their poverty, about their Roman dominators and the high taxes they pay? Jesus' eyes scan down the text. He finds what he has been looking for and stops. He takes a deep breath and begins: (*read with some spontaneous commentary*)

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,*

*because the Lord has anointed me.*

*He has sent me to preach good news to the poor,*

*to proclaim release to the prisoners*

*and recovery of sight to the blind,*

*to liberate the oppressed,*

*and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor....*

Then he stops! In mid-sentence he stops! Had he read the whole passage he would have ended "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" with "and the day of the vengeance of our God." It's the passage where Isaiah speaks of favor for us and vengeance for them, for others different from us, for our enemies. Jesus won't read the last part. Jesus' audience, knowing the text, expects him to read the whole thing but he doesn't.

Now we understand more clearly why Luke described what he did next. "He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the synagogue assistant, and sat down." He is really done! He meant to end where he ended. Every eye in the synagogue was fixed on him." They are stunned! What will he say next? Their eyes plead with him to say something that will complete Isaiah's sentence and confirm their understanding of the world. Jesus is interpreting scripture by what he reads and doesn't read from the Hebrew Scriptures.

How will Jesus respond? His great temptation will be to say something that pleases those eyes, wins their approval and draws them toward liking him. If he yields he will no longer be operating in the power of the Spirit; that spirit that comes from a place beyond human rivalry, that place outside the sphere of human influence. To speak in the power of the Spirit is to speak in line with the will of God; a will that always seeks what's best for all and not the speaker's ego or the audiences desire to think they are special because others are not. When Jesus won the battle against narcissism that the New Testament portrays as the struggle with the devil, was his winning sufficiently grounded in the Spirit to stand the test of every eye in the synagogue being fixed on him?

This was Jesus' chance to become famous without going to the cross; another temptation really. He could avoid being unpopular, criticized, rejected and perhaps killed. Was Jesus called to be admired by the people of Nazareth or grounded in God? All he had to do was say what those eyes wanted him to say and he would be back at home and one of them. He could please them and they would love him but he would no longer be his Father's son and the mission he and his father had joined to do would be aborted. What will Jesus do?

With every eye in the synagogue fixed on him, he begins to explain to them, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." The dye was set; another temptation behind him. Next week we will find out what happened next. In the meantime, may we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus! Amen.