

SERMON: Church of the Holy Spirit, Wayland, MA – January 24, 2010

Sermon for the 3rd Sunday after the Epiphany – Church of the Holy Spirit, Wayland – The Rev. Dr. Frederick P. Moser, Rector

Far from the synagogue in Nazareth where Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah in today's gospel lived the community whose interpretation of that scroll shaped his ministry, and the ministry of Luke's church and other first churches.

This community that shaped Jesus' ministry was the Qumran community, which lived in the area around the Dead Sea and whose writings were accidentally discovered in caves around the Dead Sea in the 1940s and 1950s. The Qumran community lived in fervent expectation of the Messiah. It attached great importance to Isaiah's words as a description of the One who was to come and for whom they were waiting.

“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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

Remember, in the Gospel of Luke, that when Jesus reads these words in today's passage from chapter 4 this is the third time that Jesus has encountered the Spirit. In chapter 3, as we read two weeks ago, the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus at his baptism in the Jordan River. Then, at the beginning of chapter 4, Luke says that Jesus, “full of the Holy Spirit,” is led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he is tempted by the devil – the passage we will read this year on the First Sunday in Lent. This Judean wilderness where Jesus was tempted and the area where the Jordan River empties into the Dead Sea where Jesus was baptized are precisely where the Qumran community lived. The way the Gospel of Luke ties these geographical areas together through the work of the Spirit is no accident. It was the Qumran community's interpretation of Isaiah that powerfully shaped Luke's understanding of the Messiah and the work of his church and the other emerging churches in the latter half of the first century and early second century.

It is after this encounter with the Qumran community's vision of the Messiah in the area of the Jordan and the Judean wilderness that Jesus goes home to Nazareth and Luke's gospel picks up the story we read today.

“Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and...he began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.”

Luke deliberately has Jesus unroll the scroll of Isaiah and read the passage that told how the Messiah was to accomplish God's mission in the world:

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“to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Jesus says that his ministry will be to make a new beginning for all people. To establish justice where poor people have been exploited, and to heal their broken hearts; to forgive and give a fresh start to prisoners; to restore sight to those who have been blinded and lost sight of God in their midst; to lift oppression, and announce the acceptable year of the Lord – the year when everything was forgiven and everyone could start over. These in fact were exactly the things that ancient Israel was commanded to do every fifty years in what was called a Jubilee year. In Jubilee years the fields were rested and reinvigorated for future harvests; debts were forgiven; slaves were freed; those who had been estranged were welcomed home. The story is poignant because, from the historical record, we know that both the year in which this story probably was set – around 27 CE – and the year in which it probably was written – around 77 CE – were both likely to have been Jubilee years. It is little wonder then that, after Jesus read from the scroll, the Gospel says, “the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him” as he says, “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

What Jesus, and really Luke, give us in this gospel is the mission statement for every church, every Body of Christ. Paul says famously in the reading from First Corinthians today, “Now you are the Body of Christ.” “You,” all of you, with all your different gifts and abilities that God has given you to put to good, creative uses, all of you together are Christ for your world; you are the church; you are the visible Body of Christ for others. This is what God has called you together here to do: to fulfill the messianic hopes of the poor and captive of your time; to heal broken people and broken communities; to be, together, by your communal witness, the model of hope and freedom; and to work so that every year will be a year of Jubilee and there will no more be need to proclaim such years as exceptions because they will become the order of the day every day of every year. You are the Body of Christ. You are the one called to read from the scroll of Isaiah today. These words you read from the scroll today are the mission statement of the church you are called to be in your 21st century, and, collectively, you are the one through whom the scripture is being fulfilled in the world’s hearing of it.

The Gospel’s point – and the point Paul makes explicit – is that the “me” in the scroll of Isaiah is not personal. It is corporate. It is us together. Taken together, all the readings today are about us and what God has called us together as the church to do. Nehemiah reminded us of the singular importance of Scripture in forming the kind of community we are to be in God: one bound together in God’s desire for a reconciled world and commitment to helping the poor. Paul reminds us of all the gifts it takes to do that reconciling work – no one possesses them all; but everyone possesses at least

one, and God needs every one, offered constructively, for God's mission. And, the gospel aligns God's mission – our ministry – with Jesus' as Christ's Body in this world. This means that part of our responsibility is to encourage each other to offer the gifts God has placed in each one of us for the most constructive ministry possible. Paul's vision of what should go on inside the church is that the members should be all about building up one another, so that the whole Body is strengthened for the work of mission out in the world. For Paul, the internal work of spiritual development is inextricably connected to the external work of doing God's ministry of reconciliation in the world. This is why we are dismissed to go and do ministry at the end of every Eucharist.

How relevant the scripture then becomes for our life together when we apply it to our world even these past two weeks. To proclaim good news to the poor, release to those broken and bound in a terrible situation, and hope for freedom and healing – how can we not see images of Haiti when we hear those words? Sadly it has taken a tragedy to bring widespread attention to this country, though many faithful people have been ministering there for a long time. The truths that are coming out through this awful event are staggering. Just one I heard just yesterday: before the earthquake there were 380,000 orphan children in Haiti; there are so many more now. – “The Spirit of the Lord is upon us – Christ's Risen Body today – because we have been anointed in our Baptism to bring good news to the poor.” Let these words stream – from the ancient time of Isaiah giving hope to broken exiles, through the communities of Qumran, Nazareth, Luke and the others of the century when God first called the church into being, right into the Body that is us today. Let them be our mission statement, and the reason we do all that we do here even as a parish named for the very Spirit that animated to One who still lives and ministers through the living Body of Jesus Christ that is us.