

“The Good News: Being Filled With the Power of the Spirit”

Psalm 19; Luke 4:14-21
Third Sunday of Epiphany
Message for January 23, 2022
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This week Psalm 19 can be explored alongside the wisdom teaching from Luke. The Psalms endure because they resonate with our human experiences and quest for God. This is one of the seventy-five psalms traditionally ascribed to David, listening from his experience for a moment of freedom, when self merges with something greater than the self.

Psalm 19 speaks of the divine voice in all of creation. The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament reveals God’s handiwork. This Psalm reflects, more than any other, the beauty and splendor of the Hebrew poetry found in the Psalter. The author and theologian, C.S. Lewis wrote, “I take this to be the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world.”

David expresses his adoration of God with passion and honesty. His utmost want is to please God, and his greatest fear is that he will fail to do so. We hear him share his struggle as well as his witness - he grapples with the fact that some of his desires conflict with his expectations of himself and the expectations of his faith.

In this, he describes our own experience as well. He assures us that if we follow God’s instruction, we will taste and see the goodness of God, for they are “More to be desired...than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.”

David’s portal to God was partially through his respect for and adherence to God’s laws and statutes as he understood them. The words of God are life itself given by God to the believer who commits to a lifelong study of God’s laws and practice of faith.

David knew this, even as he struggled with bringing its truth to bear on his life. Certainly, we can know things intellectually, but moving it down into our hearts and integrating it into our lives and practice is a life-long endeavor.

Our personal sense of God and the things that happen to us can mutually influence each other. Some people feel drawn closer to God through their hardships while others may feel distanced from God by those same experiences. Throughout the Psalms, David gives us the sense that he adores God and through his experiences of suffering he finds strength in God.

Our experiences with both success and pain can make it difficult for us to trust and feel the presence of God. Success can give us a false sense of what it means to be secure as human beings living in a world over which we have little control. Our painful experiences can erode our confidence in our own abilities and cause us to distrust ourselves, others, and even God.

We, like David, have a mixture of what makes us feel ashamed and proud to be who we are. The Psalms gives us a sense of how David was set free by his faith in God. We are reminded here that we are part of God's vision for God's creation.

Psalm 19 describes how God equips us, nurtures us, and supports us, which naturally leads into the wisdom teaching from Luke, which begins, "Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee..." All three of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) recount the story of Jesus teaching in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, but today's wisdom teaching from Luke places this story at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry, immediately following his baptism and temptation.

Luke also is specific about what Jesus read and what he said in the synagogue. In this way, Luke highlights for us who Jesus is, what his ministry is, what his church will be and do, and the reaction that will unfold as a result.

"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."

Jesus speaks these verses from Isaiah as a description of who he is and what he is about. These verses would have been very familiar to the people gathered but imagine how differently these words were experienced as Jesus not only read them, but let them all know that he, in fact, was the anointed one to whom Isaiah references!

Through reading that particular text, Jesus was announcing that the gospel, the Good News, was for the poor and oppressed, speaking to those at the margins of society. Jesus was clear that he came to liberate from real oppressive structures the marginalized - the impoverished, the war captives, the poor in health, the political prisoners. Jesus came to turn the economic structures upside down.

This is a challenging message for those of us who are not among the poor, marginalized, oppressed, or imprisoned of our society to hear. Jesus brings together both the spiritual and social justice aspects of his teaching and ministry by beginning with the Isaiah passage.

The Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism while he was praying, led him into the wilderness to be tested by the devil, and now empowers his ministry in Galilee; anointing him to “bring good news to the poor” along with release, healing, freedom, and justice.

In Luke’s Gospel, the Spirit claims, tests, and empowers Jesus for the ministry that lies before him. The Holy Spirit calls us also - to live into the kingdom here on earth. How do we know if we are doing this? How can we know that we have the power of the Spirit?

We know because the Holy Spirit gives us something to do for God, and a time to do it. There is a sense of urgency in Jesus’ mission. There is a sense of urgency in our mission as we witness those who are living on the margins without access to shelter, food, safety, and health. We are each invited to be agents of God’s grace and mercy.

As children of God, may we each see and hear the leadings of the Spirit and attend to those in need. As we do so, we will recognize in ourselves the places where we are hurting, where we are lacking, where we were lost or blind or ignorant.

What might this look like in our daily lives? To see the beauty of Creation and our place in it? To awaken to the Spirit embedded in everything around us? May this scripture be fulfilled in our hearing.