

Luke 4:14-21: **Filled with the Spirit**

C. Nolan Huizenga, Highland Presbyterian Church, Louisville, 26 January 2025

Since just about every line of today's gospel has something interesting to unpack, we're going to offer you an "illuminated reading." Vini will read a verse or so, I'll say a little about it, then we'll go on to the next line. Let's listen for God's good news from Luke 4:14-21 (CEB with minor edits).

Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee

We're familiar with the word spirit meaning breath, meaning one's very life. If you've done the sacred work of keeping vigil beside someone who is dying, you may have listened to that labored, shallow sound of a person taking their last breaths. When the end does come, we say that that person's spirit has left. In older language, the person "gave up the ghost." The spirit is that which enlivens.

The Greek word for spirit does mean breath, wind, life. God's own Holy Spirit blows through Luke's gospel. So before his birth an angel proclaims that John will be filled with the Holy Spirit, and when his mother Elizabeth also is filled with the Spirit, John leaps in her womb. After John's birth, his father Zechariah gets filled with the Holy Spirit and blurts out praise to God. When the Holy Spirit comes over Mary, she conceives Jesus. And the Spirit rests on old Simeon as he celebrates the baby Jesus in the temple.

The Holy Spirit shows up dramatically at Jesus' baptism, coming bodily like a dove to bless Jesus, as Megan preached last week. Then that same Spirit compels Jesus to hike into the wilderness, where over forty days he's tempted. Jesus denies all that the tempter offers. Alive with clarity and purpose after that grueling experience, Jesus brings the Spirit home with him.

[A]nd news about him spread throughout the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

In Jesus' time Jews gathered for scripture, teaching, and prayers in a local sacred space — a synagogue. The Temple in Jerusalem remained the center of Jewish worship. Not all the faithful could get there often, so for spiritual and communal sustenance many towns contained their own synagogues. When the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed a few decades after Jesus lived, local synagogues became yet more important houses of worship. That remains true in today's world.

But Jesus was no professional minister with his own congregation. He lived as an itinerant, unpaid rabbi, a traveling spiritual teacher visiting various synagogues to worship and to teach. In that role he must have impressed folks in his home region, because word was getting around. But can you imagine any preacher being "praised by everyone"? There's something divine about Jesus because none of the rest of us will ever be that good. ☺ We preachers point to the love of God, while Jesus *is* the love of God.¹

Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been raised.

¹ Fitzgerald, Matt. "Luke 4:14-20: Homiletical Perspective." *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Volume 1, Chapters 1-11*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2014. p. 101.

What happens when you go back home, especially when you return filled with a new spirit, a new sense of purpose? Can you expect understanding? Affirmation? Fear? Resistance? In today's story townspeople from little Nazareth welcome and respect Jesus, that kid they knew from down the street. Keep reading this chapter, though, and notice their wonder turning quickly to hostility when Jesus celebrates outsiders and Gentiles. Hometowns can be hard on their offspring. When you figure out who you are and what God asks of you, not everyone will like it.²

On the Sabbath he went to the synagogue as he normally did and stood up to read. The synagogue assistant gave him the scroll from the prophet Isaiah.

Does scripture feed your spirit? Do you wrestle with scripture? Have you given up on it? Sometimes can it feel like your lifeblood? You heard Gerry read our Hebrew scripture lesson from the book of Nehemiah. That story shows the Israelite people returning from exile, rediscovering their scripture and getting reacquainted with its power. One of my favorite interpreters of scripture in our time is the preacher Sam Wells, from England. He says that Israel's experience of exile made them look for new meaning in their sacred texts.

What they found was a collection of stories, of how God created the world, called a people, saved them from famine and slavery, made a covenant with them, and gave them land, king, and temple; before things went astray. But then...came the crucial moment: where the exiled people of Judah wove those stories together and discovered a faith that God would save them as before, and that, most remarkably of all, *they were as close to God in exile as they had been in the Promised Land.*³

So in *Luke's* story, the assistant hands Jesus the scroll of Isaiah, a prophetic book about that pain of Israel's exile and the promise of redemption. It's a book about people being carried away from their Promised Land, enduring suffering, and then awakening to the hope of homecoming.

[Jesus] unrolled the scroll [of Isaiah] and found the place where it was written:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me.
God 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.*

Whenever we read scripture we make a lot of choices. Starting with which parts to read! Much of Isaiah can sound bleak, punitive, scary. It's a reminder of judgment and of very hard times. Yet the gospel tells us that Jesus specifically looked for *these* verses in Isaiah. They ring with power and liberation and the Spirit of God who brings freedom. By reading *these* words Jesus retells his people their own

² I have pastor Ken Henry (at Stone Church, Willow Glen, CA) to thank for that sentence.

³ Wells, Sam. "Story turns to faith when people believe that God has entered their story." BBC Radio 4 Thought for the Day, 22 January 2016. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03g3vgg>

history. He reminds them of Isaiah's dynamic prophecy. And he revisits a time when God's Spirit spoke good news to broken people.

These verses also form "a mission statement for Jesus' life, encompassing who Jesus is, what his ministry [will be] about, and how people will respond to him."⁴

[Jesus] rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the synagogue assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the synagogue was fixed on him.

Jesus follows the synagogue tradition by standing at the front to read the scripture, then sitting down to instruct the people. When Jesus takes a seat, they're all wondering what he's going to say next, eager to hear how he'll interpret Isaiah's words for them.

He began to explain to them, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it."

Wait. What did he say?? What can Jesus mean? What exactly has been "fulfilled"? The people listening to Jesus feel the threat of oppression by their Roman rulers. They witness poverty and subsistence living around Galilee. Surely they know blind folks in town, and some political prisoners too. Jesus' hearers know full well that Isaiah's vision of divine liberation is not yet accomplished.

Jesus knows it too. The fulfillment he proclaims is that the Spirit of the Lord is upon *him and his hearers*. Jesus tells them: the Spirit of God is in my voice, in this room, speaking grace into you all, and breathing healing and liberation into this groaning world.

But the audacity! It borders on blasphemy, this claim by the local carpenter's son that he's got a divine mandate, that he's filled with God's own Spirit, that he's declaring release for the prisoners. Yet he's speaking with such grace and hope, speaking right to the longings of their hearts. Can he be for real?

All these years later that's our challenge too. How might each of us react to this story? I'll start by showing you my cards. I need to hear the promise in this gospel text. It matters to me because life is painful and the world is a mess.

Our nation represents just over 4% of the world's population, yet we lock up 16% of the world's prisoners.⁵ In a society that unjust I'm wired to look for any signs of hope. Like "Proclaim release to the prisoners."

But what does he mean? Is Jesus implying that it's God's will to set loose violent insurrectionists like Barabbas? Like the January 6th marauders? No. Jesus does *not* tell us to pervert justice or to celebrate violence. And there's a big clue in what

⁴ Sherouse, Alan P. "Luke 4:14-20: Exegetical Perspective." *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Volume 1, Chapters 1-11*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2014. p. 99.

⁵ UN Office on Drugs and Crime. "2024 Prison Matters: Global prison population and trends — A focus on rehabilitation." https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/briefs/Prison_brief_2024.pdf
<https://bjs.ojp.gov/document/cpus22st.pdf>

Jesus says just before: “God has sent me to preach good news *to the poor*, to proclaim release to the prisoners.”

In biblical cultures, and in many times and places since then, you might be thrown in prison because you couldn’t pay a debt. Sometimes enforced labor counted toward paying down what you owed. Or you stayed locked up until your family scraped together enough money to free you.

Many US prison facilities still exploit inmates by forcing them to labor for very little pay or none. If you want to give your sense of righteous anger a workout, start reading about prison labor in the United States. Hundreds of prisoners even fought the recent wildfires in Los Angeles, many of them paid just over \$1 an hour. So proclaim release to the poor in prison.

And proclaim release to the economically desperate who come to our borders seeking a sustainable life. Migrants come to this land of plenty for myriad reasons, and often because they can’t keep their families afloat in their places of origin. They are trying to escape the imprisonment of poverty, or a threat of violence that imprisons their hearts.

Kentucky Refugee Ministries tells us that starting the day of the presidential inauguration, every scheduled arrival of a refugee family has been canceled. That includes people already cleared by our State Department and by the UN refugee offices, people who had plane tickets in their hands to come to the US, people who have waited their turn for decades in some cases. At the annual meeting after worship we will hear an update from KRM about this critical moment.

And what of those in desperate need who already have arrived in the US? At both the national and the state level, leaders have been lashing out against recent immigrants, employing violent rhetoric blaming refugees and migrants for all the ills in our society. Deportation raids are coming and immigrant communities are terrified.

Proclaim release to the prisoners. That’s basically what Episcopal bishop Mariann Budde preached this week in Washington National Cathedral, at a prayer service attended by the president and other national leaders. Bishop Budde respectfully pleaded for mercy for LGBTQ people who are under attack. Then she said,

The vast majority of immigrants are not criminals. I ask you to have mercy, Mr. President, on those in our communities whose children fear that their parents will be taken away, and that you help those who are fleeing war zones and persecution in their own lands to find compassion and welcome here.⁶

I highlight this story not to make Bishop Budde into a hero, though I admire her courage in rising to the moment. Like Jesus did, she’s gotten a lot of angry pushback. Both were accused of sowing division.

⁶ https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/21/us/politics/trump-bishop.html?unlocked_article_code=1.rE4.RXgt.civW6nllNJG7&smid=url-share

But this story of one voice empowered by God's Spirit reminds us that *your* voice can be used powerfully too. You never know what opportunities any of *us* may be given to echo what Jesus himself preached — good news to the poor, release to the prisoners, hope to the exiled.

And we can do this — we are going to do this — because Jesus' words of hope shape you and me as his followers. Hearing Jesus preach can transform lives. It changed the people in that synagogue — Jesus is both marveled over and rejected.

And listening to Jesus preach changes us. This scripture reminds us what grace makes possible in God's world, and gives us the hope and the courage to bring grace about. God's Spirit connects what Jesus Christ preached with what our lives preach to the world.

Every eye in the synagogue was fixed on Jesus. Waiting to see if such promises could be believed, could be *lived*. And filled with the Spirit, he said to them, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as *you* heard it."

In the name of God who breathes life,
Christ who shares our Breath,
and the Spirit's holy wind.