

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

Growing in the Spirit

Luke 14.14-21

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The gospel draws us into a life of faith that is full and total and complete, at least this is the aspiration. The gospel calls us into a life of faith fully engaged with our minds, which seek to understand and be understood, fully encompassing our hearts, which desire to give and receive love and compassion, and fully employing our hands as the bodily instruments of service and union with community and neighbor. This is the whole Gospel in our full selves in intimacy with God and compassionate love of one another. Nowhere is this more fully expressed than in the gospel of Luke, and perhaps nowhere in Luke's gospel than in our reading this morning.

Luke's gospel, and his second volume Acts, set before us a holistic, maturing way of understanding, following, and living in Christ. Today's Luke 4 reading brings it all together in Jesus, and today's reading in 1 Corinthians does as well—because the power that enlivened the ministry of Jesus flows from him into us—the church in the world—to enliven our minds, break open our hearts in compassion, and stretch out our hands in mercy, just as his were. This is a picture of a whole faith, a whole life, and a picture of the faith-life we grow into as our faith in Christ grows and matures.

I'm using this phrase—a maturing faith for a couple of reasons today. In the gospel we see Jesus growing right before our eyes, under the guidance of the Spirit at key points in his life in the first few chapters of Luke. His growth is a kind of pattern that is experienced in our growth as we grow and mature in our faith. A maturing faith will sometimes sound very strange and be very challenging to immature faith, which can be identified by its desire to stay immature. Maturing sounds like a fairly easy process, but it's not—it wasn't for Jesus, and it's not for us. There are times of great joy and hard times, too—there are internal questions and doubts, and sometimes as you grow and change, you become a stranger to the person you once were and to those who knew you before. Isn't this Joseph's son? They asked about Jesus in his hometown.

All of this to say: If you are going to read the gospel of Luke, you are going to encounter Jesus who will challenge, stretch, and change you, if you will let him. And you will be in the presence of the Holy Spirit who'll get after you. In other words: buckle up.

Luke's gospel doesn't give long, theological or metaphysical explanations of what or who the Spirit is, but the Spirit has a leading role from the first page. Luke speaks over and over of the presence and power of the Spirit in moments of challenge, crisis, and invitation that change us and changed Jesus. Luke highlights the work and presence of the Spirit, especially with Jesus.

The pattern is set from the beginning:

- In chapter 1, the Holy Spirit comes upon Mary who will give birth to Jesus...
- In chapter 3, the Holy Spirit descends like a dove at the baptism of Jesus...
- In chapter 4, Jesus is said to be “full of the Holy Spirit,” who leads him into the wilderness for 40 days.
- In our reading today, Jesus returns home in the power of the Spirit to Galilee and to his hometown. There, he opens a scroll and reads, as if it were a summary of his life until then or as if it were a revelation given to him, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.”

Isaiah 61 is the passage he read, a messianic message of hope for a people who were suffering in captivity—Isaiah is promising them: *You will be released; you will go home; your life has a purpose, and it has a hope, no matter what you can see in front of you now. You are not abandoned.* These promises, from Isaiah in his time to all of those who would come after, burned brightly in the hearts of the people who must have heard this passage read in synagogue many times. It stood as a timeless hope for a time when God would raise up a savior who would deliver his people from their trials and their troubles. Never give up hope. Never stop having faith. *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me*, the passage begins, and it’s with this passage, with this very line that Jesus announces his identity and ministry in the gospel of Luke: *one upon whom is the spirit of the Lord, one through whom God is going to bring good news to suffering people.*

It’s the natural, or should we say *supernatural* conclusion of the opening four chapters of the gospel. The Spirit of the Lord is upon him—at his birth, at the supercharged experience of baptism, in the lonely, temptation-filled season of wilderness, in return to home, and return to redemptive transformation of everyday life.

Jesus’ experience that we see in the first few chapters of Luke is a pattern that repeats itself in the maturing spiritual journey of many people.

The Spirit of the Lord was with me when my faith-journey was new and fresh. This is what it often feels like as the life of faith takes its first baby steps. Not for everyone, but for sure for some. These are the kind of stories you hear told in testimonies—of dramatic conversions—road to Damascus kind of experiences. Not everyone can point to such an experience in their lives, but some do—that youth camp at the bonfire, that mission trip, the late-night prayer when God--as they say--showed up. Thanks to God for those kind of experiences—they stay with you as road markers on the way, especially when you are beginning to find the trailhead of the path of faith. Jesus’ trailhead begins at baptism, with the Holy Spirit descending upon him.

So too, do many people have experiences of wilderness in their lives. The Spirit of the Lord was guiding me, even when I was in the wilderness and temptations sank their teeth into me, when my doubts and questions and troubles overwhelmed me--when I felt lost and when I felt alone. You are not alone, hear me say you are not alone, if you have had

seasons in life—short or so very long—when you felt like your prayers evaporated if they took shape at all, when doubts were stronger than sure convictions, when you felt alone or unsure, and didn't know if you'd ever find sure footing again. Challenges to faith that can push us into the wilderness are all around—from skeptics and doubters and the kind of public nonsense that comes from other professing Christians sometimes, and it can be so very hard to remember who you are. Well, who you are is being transformed through the experience. Even there, the Spirit of the Lord is with you, even when you don't feel it anymore.

Maturing faith comes to say: The Spirit of the Lord is with me—even when the ecstatic experience is long ago, when I have some wounds and some scars, when I'm in the everyday life of weekly and daily life with my neighbors, and with my own self—who is sometimes a neighbor and sometimes a stranger.

It is in this third stage of maturing faith that the faith becomes a faith that is for head and heart and hands. The gospel is a gospel of the whole person, of the whole community, our whole being in God's being. In a world of fracture and self-interest, and ego-centric concern, the gospel is a very different way of being in the world. A maturing faith comes to know it deep in the bones. It stretches the mind; it's a Spirit-filled life that moves the heart; It's a life that opens our hands in service.

Luke tells stories of the gospel's liberative meaning for the poor and the outcasts and the vulnerable. Luke loves these stories. The Good Samaritan is in Luke, who showed mercy on the one who was beaten and left by the side of the road. So is the story of the prodigal son who'd thrown his life away, but was welcomed back home as a changed man and welcomed back home with open arms. A maturing faith in Luke's gospel isn't just an extraordinary spiritual experience though it can be that; it's seasoned by testing and trial, and it emerges into the ordinary, the quotidian existence of life with neighbors and in community, and as it does, it turns outward as the welfare of others comes to the heart of the life of faith.

Jesus unrolls the scroll and finds the place where it is written and then reads, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." In those words is a foretaste of all that will come as he lives out who he already by now knows himself to be. On this day, Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. No one said a word; no one moved a muscle. Every eye on him.

Then he said the words that changed everything, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus is anointed by the power of the Holy Spirit for a messianic purpose of bringing hope, life, sight, freedom, and jubilee to those who are in their own wilderness, their own captivities, and sorrows and confusions and troubles. He claims a power and a purpose divine in origin, Spirit-filled in power, and transformative for the whole world.

This same identity is given to his people, the church in the world, accompanied by this same power. It will be lived out in many different ways, empowered by the one and same Spirit—the same Spirit in which we were baptized. The Spirit upon us ordains us to the ministry of the gospel—the whole gospel for the whole person in the whole community. It is this or it is not of the Spirit of Jesus. Christians have and will live out their faith in a wide variety of ways—pastors and missionaries, quiet contemplatives and busy, active, institution builders, teachers and social workers, in business and medicine, as plumbers and secretaries and on and on. We are made by the Spirit the body of Christ—head, heart, hands—made in the blessed moments of religious fervor, in the wilderness where faith and hope seem lost, and in the ordinary daily life with one another and our neighbors.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon you.

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There will be moments when this is so wonderful your heart might explode.

There will be times when this is so hard your heart will break.

There will be times when your heart will be at rest in the sure conviction of who you are and who you are becoming.

There are times when you will have more questions than answers.

You go and grow together with your fellow travelers—we need one another—you go and do, you come to know you do not travel this road of faith alone, but you are with the Spirit, you are in the body, and there's a world that needs you to remember who you are in Christ—a world that needs you to remember who we are, who we are called to be, who we must be and can be in such a time as this.

Amen.