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St. Thomas Church
Epiphany 3C;1.24.16
Lk 4:14-21

Let the Spirit Sing!

Today's gospel lesson from the 4th Chapter of Luke, is full of power and helps us imagine what the Spirit-propelled life really looks like—for Jesus and for us. Who would have thought that we could celebrate Pentecost in late January? I don't know about you but during these gloomy, rainy wintery days I welcome the blaze of the Spirit and religiously look for it! It is important to recognize that God's animating Spirit has been with humanity from the very beginning of Creation. In this morning's reading from Nehemiah, we see the movement of God's spirit at work in the people of ancient Israel. They have returned from exile and slavery in Babylonia and are now rebuilding their lives in Jerusalem.

The Holy Remnant of Israel, craving for a restored identity, are lifting up their hands and shouting, "Amen. Amen" in response to the priest Ezra proclaiming the Good News contained within the Law of Moses and joyfully thanking God for the strength to start over. In a context of religious and cultural pluralism, where it would have been so easy to forget who and whose they were, these ancient Israelites are reminded to have faith, that God is good, and that they should celebrate by feasting, dancing and singing and share their joy and their provisions with those most in need.

Riding in on the spiritual wave of the Hebrew prophets, in a similar way, Jesus brings the hope and joy of a new day and a new age to his home town of Nazareth many centuries later. They too are an oppressed people in need of a Messiah.

We are told that "Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit" has returned home. Yes, it seems that not only Jesus has been filled brim full with Spirit but almost everyone else who has encountered him along the way has been too.

First there was the old priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, parents of John the Baptist. Zechariah met an angel. He lost his voice. He becomes filled with the Holy Spirit and eventually sings. The song that he and the Spirit sing goes like this, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel for he has visited and redeemed his people."

Next Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and the Spirit sing their joyful song together, "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...He

has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.”

And after the baby Jesus is born Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the righteous and devout Simeon at the Temple for the rite of circumcision. Luke tells us that the Spirit was resting upon Simeon as he picked up Jesus in his arms and blessed God. Simeon and the Spirit sing their song together, “My eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples.”

And guided by the Holy Spirit the baby Jesus grows up into a man who is baptized by John in the Jordan river. We are told that the Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism and becomes the anointed one. And when He arose out of the waters, Jesus and the Spirit of God sing the most beautiful song ever, “You are my beloved with whom I am well pleased.”

And even in the arid wilderness desert the song of the Spirit remained. Jesus who was led there by the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit to struggle for forty days and nights never forgot the song of his baptism and the anointing of the Holy Spirit to bring Good News to all of God’s people.

And so Jesus, with all of the songs of the Spirit that he had learned and all the songs of the faithful he had heard, entered the synagogue at Nazareth one day as was his custom. “As was his custom” is a phrase full of meaning. Jesus was not an outsider to the community to which he was speaking. He had received the rite of initiation into the Jewish faith. He was sitting with those who had helped raise him since infancy.

This was his home town and yet he had been on a journey that had transformed him so radically that they had difficulty recognizing him and his new song. He was coming home again but he wasn’t the same person that they had once known. In therapy circles, we speak of the process of differentiation. Healthy differentiation from one’s family of origin or religion of origin occurs when we can stay connected to our roots but listen to the Spirit’s call to grow and change and speak our truth, even sing a new song, without being shut down by the fear of being judged or rejected.

This is a Holy Spirit moment for Jesus. It was also a Holy Spirit moment for those who had the ears to listen. It is the Spirit residing in Jesus’ heart that guided him to

choose the prophetic song he chose. The story says the scroll was handed to him by an attendant but he and the Spirit got to choose the chapter and the verse.

Can you imagine that freedom and joy that Jesus felt as he sung out what would define and become his mission statement as a fully differentiated, healthy, spirit-propelled servant of God? In an animated voice, prompted by the Spirit, Jesus boldly proclaimed a new song to the people gathered there, people who had known him since birth. It was gutsy and it was beautiful at the same time: “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.” It was what Joseph Campbell called, “The Hero’s Journey.”

And because our Creator and the Holy Spirit reflect the beauty of the masculine and the feminine, let’s hear it again with a different pronoun, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because she has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

She 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.”

The year of the Lord’s favor refers to the Jubilee year when the Torah required that ancestral lands would be returned to the historical owners and debts would be forgiven. This is one of the ways that those at the lower end of the economic spectrum could find hope, release, and even joy. It is hard for us to begin to imagine what joy this would have brought to the oppressed.

Jesus models for us the ability to be true to ourselves, and true to the workings of the Holy Spirit while remaining connected and engaged with those we have the most to lose if we are not accepted. This was a synagogue reading that was to become a mission statement that would become a song for Jesus all the way to the Cross. It is also our song and we are called to sing it even if no one is listening or if others disagree with it or don’t like the tune.

Few things in life bring as much joy as finding your own voice. I will never forget my own experience of trying to find my own singing voice several years ago. I have never been a strong singer, was told early in life that I couldn’t sing, but once ordained as a priest I felt it was my duty to at least try. So for a year and half I religiously went to weekly voice lessons with our very own soprano Lisa Lee, the wife of our former rector Jeff Lee. I will never forget her initial assessment.

“Steve, do you want the good news or the bad news first? The good news is that you are not tone deaf. The bad news is that it may be a very long time before you will be able to chant the Eucharistic prayer!” No matter what your singing ability is we are all called to sing the songs of Jesus to the very best of our ability because we are only fully anointed to serve Jesus when we can radiate enough joy and hope to be contagious. When we sing we allow the widest opening into our hearts for the Spirit of God to propel us, to move us, to use us for his purposes.

As we will learn next week, many who heard Jesus’ mission of compassion in a small synagogue in Nazareth couldn’t yet sing the song or hear or understand the music—some even fought against it being played—but all of the resistance in the world could not keep Jesus from singing it. This morning, let us join the faithful company of saintly singers—especially Ezra, Zechariah, Elizabeth, John, Simeon, Mary, and Jesus himself, and joyfully proclaim the holy work of the Spirit in our lives and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. Amen.