

Luke 4:14-21 Spirit of the Lord is upon ME!

Epiphany 3C and Confirmation

What does it mean to be filled with the power of the Spirit?

Song: Spirit of the Living God, move afresh in us. [LEVAS #115]

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I knew a woman once, who at the age of 17, found herself trapped
with two sisters, her mother and an old aunt, in a basement of a building.

They were caught there with several other families,
for about 6 weeks, between Christmas and Easter 1945.

It was the siege of Budapest during WWII.

The Russians and Germans converged on the city and neither army would let go.

It was a season of unimaginable and unspeakable horrors.

On Easter weekend, gaunt and starving, they returned to their hometown like ghosts,
a three hour train trip taking two days.

Everyone was amazed that they had survived.

Not long after that, the Russians took control of Hungary.

Their home was confiscated and the 5 of them were allowed only two rooms,

They had to share the bathroom and kitchen with strangers who were moved in,
peasant Communists this woman said, who spied on them.

No one had a job. Food was scarce.

The politics grew to be frightening, especially for a religious family.

And so an uncle, a Hungarian Reformed Church pastor and bishop,

in March of 1947, in an effort to save the seed corn,

sent Ruth (then only 19 years old) and one of her sisters,

each with only two suitcases,

to another uncle in this country.

Ruth hated the Russians, for what they had done to her family and country.
She had good reason, and for many years,

she did everything she could to subvert their hold.

All during the 50's and 60's and 70's, in public presentations and writings,
in letter to senators and congressmen,

Ruth pleaded for the cause of her homeland,

for freedom for her kith and kin under Communism.

And she sent an untold number of care packages overseas,

each carefully packed to outwit the Hungarian Customs officials

who would open boxes and keep things they saw that looked appealing.

Then, in the summer of 1978, Ruth finally returned to Hungary.

After the trip, she told of seeing a statue in Budapest that was erected after the war
to salute the bravery of the Russian soldiers who died "liberating" Hungary.

While standing there, she said, she had a sudden realization

that Russian mothers had sons too,

just like her own son, Mark, who had recently reached a draftable age.

At that moment, with tears overflowing,

her anger and hate fled, heart softened, and her tone changed.

The cold warrior was transformed into a peace-maker.

That woman was my mother.

From then on, she proclaimed the Good News of forgiveness, compassion and love,
and she lived a witness for justice and peace among all people.

An early time I remember in particular was during the Iran hostage crisis (Nov '79).

A ritual had developed in my hometown.

At noon everyday of the crisis, churches rang their steeple bells.

It was a public prayer and witness that the crisis must end and the hostages be freed.

(Which incidentally, in my memory, was the original intent of the yellow ribbon phenomenon - bring the hostages home, not support the troops.)

My mother volunteered as a bell ringer once a week.

On inauguration day in January 1981, the day the hostages were freed,

Mom happened to be the person assigned to ring the bell.

It affected her so strongly that she wrote an editorial about her feelings.

The essay was printed in our church newsletter.

In it she shared how closely she could identify with the hostages,

their hunger and fear and loneliness, and

how overjoyed she was that the situation was resolved relatively peacefully,

and that the hostages could finally go home.

She urged that we not forget the experience,

and she longed and hoped for a world

in which such things would never happen again.

What does it mean to be “filled with the power of the Spirit?”

as the Gospel reading tells us of Jesus?

My guess is that it has something to do with being transformed in such a way,

and becoming so clear about your faith,

that your world view changes,

and you can not help but passionately share the Good News,

and work for a better world.

It is what I think happened to my Mom that day

when she stood in front of the statue to Russian soldiers.

Consider for a moment, what happened to Jesus.

The Gospel story that was read a moment ago takes place immediately after Jesus' baptism and his 40 day wilderness experience.

At baptism and in the wilderness

he has been filled with the power of the Spirit.

Then the first thing he does upon his return,

is to go to the synagogue and recite a passage from Isaiah 61.

*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 is a passage about an ancient practice called Jubilee, described in Leviticus 25.

No one is certain whether Jubilee actually ever happened, or if it was only an ideal,

but during a Jubilee year, which was to take place once every 49 years,

in a cycle echoing sabbath (every 7 days) and sabbatical (every 7 years)

people were called to repent and return to God.

There were two hallmarks of a Jubilee year:

- 1) Every relationship was to be set right, and
- 2) Every thing and every person were to rest.

It was a call for a complete economic re-organization.

Limits were put on earnings growth and accumulation.

Limits were removed from the basic needs such as food and shelter

All debts, financial and otherwise, were to be forgiven.

Everyone was to find out what belonged to whom and return it.

No one was to work, and even the land was to rest, to lie fallow all year.

Those who were literally prisoners, or figuratively captive to life situations,
were to be freed, and sight was to be restored to all.

In short, justice was to reign. Imagine that!?

And Jesus then said

“TODAY these words are fulfilled, in your hearing.”

He was proclaiming that that very moment was the time of Jubilee,
and that he was the fulfillment, the messiah, who was bringing it.

There was to be no more waiting.

No wonder everyone was amazed at his teaching,
and later as he said more, some were challenged and threatened.

After that first brief sermon in which Jesus proclaims Jubilee,
he launches into three years of ministry to show everyone what he meant.

He includes ALL outcasts, no one is excluded:

not even prostitutes, sinners, or tax collectors,
lepers, children, or women,
Gentiles or Samaritans.

He forgives everyone,

heals many,
speaks the truth to power.

He pleads for compassion, telling us to

feed the hungry, clothe the poor, heal the sick,
basically, to care for the least among us.

He does not water down his message, flatten or trivialize it,
or accommodate it to the culture or ruling powers.

He does not let up or give up.

He turns everything upside down, and shakes up the status quo.

Eventually it gets him into BIG trouble.

In the end, Jesus commissions disciples to follow his way,
to similarly proclaim the Good News and to carry on the work of justice.
The story however, does not end there in the first century.
Later, in Acts (the continuation of Luke) we read about Pentecost,
when EVERYONE gathered is filled with the Spirit.
WE are now the disciples, who at our baptism, are filled with the Spirit.
WE are the inheritors, similarly commissioned to proclaim the Good News and live it.

Those being confirmed or received today,
along with the gathered congregation.
will reaffirm promises made by or for them at baptism.
They are vows for life, guideposts along the way,
and they echo a Jubilee theology.
They call us, like Jesus, to be transformed
and to preach and work for God's kingdom.
You don't have to be a saint to do this, or be like a
Mother Theresa or ML King, Desmond tutu, Ghandi, or Dorothy Day.
You do however have to pay attention to when the Spirit fills you and moves you,
then live intentionally and faithfully,
like my mother, an ordinary woman,
whose world view changed,
and who then quietly said and did small, but extraordinary things.

Imagine what it might be like if everyone did this!
Our weary, war torn world would be transformed.
Jubilee NOW!

In 1989, my mother made a pilgrimage to Berlin.

She wanted to see the ruins of the iron curtain,

something she thought she would never see in her life time.

I still have a small chunk of the wall that she brought home.

She took a picture of some graffiti on that broken wall

and gave it to me in a poster size print.

It hangs above my office desk and reads, in English and German:

“Many small people in many small places, doing many small things,
can alter the face of the earth.”

That phrase has become a mantra for me - with the addition of “With God’s help!”

“Many small people in many small places, doing many small things,
with God’s help, can alter the face of the earth.”

[Ask confirmands to stand]

Today, my friends, you are asking for nothing less

than to be filled again, as you were at your baptism,
with the power of the Spirit.

Or more accurately, to have the Spirit let loose in and through you.

If you really mean it. beware of transformations that will come.

I commission every one of you now standing,

to not loose your sureness or boldness,
or the resulting commitment to work for God’s reign
of love and justice for the world.

Until the day you die,
especially at times when you have been hurt, are angry,
& have good cause to hate –
which we all experience from time to time,
may you ring your baptismal vows like a bell,
and pray them daily in your heart.

May you strive, with God's help, and after the example of Jesus,
to consciously abide in the Spirit,
and daily proclaim and live Jubilee.

And may we ALL continually be filled with the power of the Spirit,
sent into the world in peace,
given the strength and courage to love, proclaim and serve God
by word AND example
with gladness and singleness of heart,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. [BCP p. 365 adapted]

[Sing again: Spirit of the Living God, move afresh in us]

Amen.