

*The gospel lesson comes to us today from the gospel of Luke, chapter 4, verses 14-21. Listen now for the Word of the Lord:*

<sup>14</sup>Then Jesus, **filled with the power of the Spirit**, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

**“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.”

Then Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

Then he began to say to them, **“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”**

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord!  
**Thanks be to God!**

Good morning! It’s a joy and honor to be with you all today. I come bringing greetings on behalf of my husband Derek and our two boys, Josiah and Eli, who are all presently basking in the *summer* sun on the other side of the world.

As some of you know, Aotearoa, the Land of the Long White Cloud, what you likely know as the country of New Zealand, has been our home for a little over 2 ½ years while Derek has held a short-term appointment, teaching theology and ethics at the University of Otago.

As to be expected, living in another culture has been deeply formative. In some ways our years in New Zealand have been life-giving and vibrant. In other ways, it’s been a season of exile and wilderness.

Like most things in life, it’s been a mixed bag.

It’s where we’ve bathed in crystal clear seas and walked the magical, misty paths of Middle Earth. But it’s also where we’ve experienced culture-shock and homesickness.

It's where we've felt the *thrill* of being in a faraway land full of quirky charm and stunning natural beauty. But it's also where we've felt the ache of being too far from family as some have battled cancer and others have lost their home to a hurricane.

So, it's with mixed emotions, we prepare to say goodbye to New Zealand and return to the States.

In just a couple short months we'll move back to the glorious, glorious land of Primanti Brothers and the Pittsburgh Steelers. Back to the City of Bridges and the City of Champions. Back to the place where my husband and I spent our first years of marriage, and just a stone's throw from where I was born and raised.

Soon, oh very soon, we'll be back, in the Burg.

Still, we haven't actually lived in Pittsburgh for about 16 years. We've hopped around the country a bit, accumulating things like academic degrees and children. And rumor has it, things have changed in this city--and in this country. Things have changed. And so have we.

So, it's through the lens of these experiences, I come to today's scripture, and I come to all of you, this morning.

But before we go any further, I invite you to pause with me for a moment of prayer.

**Prayer:**

*Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us. Melt us. Mold us. Fill us. And use us. Show us your way, break our chains, led us more fully into lives of freedom and hope.*

*Through the power of your Spirit give us ears to hear You, and hearts to receive You, that we may leave this place truly nourished and ready to serve your world.*

*And may the words of my mouth and meditations of all of our hearts, be pleasing and acceptable in your sight. O Lord our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.*

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The scene from today's gospel opens with Jesus returning from his own "life-changing wilderness experience" back to *his* hometown, Nazareth. And, as Luke is careful to tell us, Jesus *begins* his ministry *in the power of the Spirit*.

Now, when we hear the phrase "in the power of the Spirit" we might think of *extraordinary* healings, *mystical* visions, or *miraculous* feedings. We might think of Jesus walking on water or raising Lazarus from the dead. Or, we might think of Pentecost and speaking in tongues.

These manifestations of the “power of the Spirit” are moments of almost *cinematic, supernatural* wonder. And, to be sure, these are very real *dimensions* of “the power of the Spirit.”

But here, in Luke's Gospel, we learn about *another* dimension of “the power of the Spirit.”

Although it does *mention* giving “sight to the blind,” the “power of the Spirit” in *today's* passage is not so much *supernatural* as it is relational, social, and political.

Sure, it's a different *dimension* of the “power of the Spirit.” But the power to *uplift* the poor, the power to *free* the prisoners, and the power to *liberate* the oppressed is no *less* astonishing, no *less life-changing*, no *less radical* or counter to the ways of this world, than the power to walk on water, or the power to raise the dead.

In Luke's Gospel, it is *this* dimension of the “Spirit's power” that actually defines the ministry of Jesus.

*This* is what directs his vision, the vision of God's *upside-down* kingdom. A kingdom where the weak are *strong*, where the fools are wise, and where the proud are humbled. A place where lush banquets are thrown for the poor, where the feet of peasants are washed by a king, and where the oppressed are a *priority*. A reality where the sick are made well, where the pressed-down are lifted up, and where everyone who feels like an outsider is a VIP.

The upside-down kingdom of God? This is what is spoken of, by the prophets.  
The upside-down kingdom of God? This is what *Jesus* is all about.  
And, as followers of Christ, this is the reality *we* are called to live *into*.

Now, for those of us who love Jesus, and who seek to *follow* Jesus—all of this is a bit *obvious*. *Right?*

We've read the scriptures. We've heard the sermons. We've studied the statistics and we've read the op-eds.

We know the countries beset by poverty.  
We see them on the news. We hear about them- on the radio.  
Maybe we've even visited them on our mission trips.  
Perhaps some of us come from these countries.

We know where the “rough” neighborhoods are.  
Where the schools are failing, where the crime is rising.  
Many of us have done service projects in those places.  
Some of us live in those neighborhoods.

We know about the captives.  
We're familiar with the crisis of mass incarceration in this country.

We've heard the stories of those wrongfully convicted being finally exonerated and released.

We've donated to our local prison ministry.

Maybe some of *us* have known the experience of imprisonment.

We know about oppression.

Again, we see it online and on-air.

We know about racialized violence.

We've heard about religious persecution.

We know about human trafficking, rogue nations, and authoritarian regimes.

We hear about all this bad news each and every day.

All of *this*? It's the way of the world.

All of *this*? It's the work, of what scripture calls, the "powers and principalities" of the present age.

All of *this* is what Jesus, *in the power of the Spirit*, comes to turn upside-down, to reorder, and to *set right*.

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Even so, this Spirit-empowered, prophetic work may not be the *only* thing this morning's gospel, has to offer us.

Now, it's *true*: to whom *much* is given, much *is* required.

And *of course*: those who have, are called to *share*, with those who have not.

And *yes*: those *with* power—whether economic, political, or social—should use it, on behalf of the *powerless*.

All of this is what the biblical prophets call "true worship" and what James calls, a "living faith." All of this, is right and good.

Even so, *sometimes* there are *other* forms of poverty, captivity, and oppression that are a little *less obvious*.

Sometimes, the poor who need good news, are those with secure housing and money in the bank.

Sometimes, those in captivity live *outside* the walls of a prison.

Sometimes, the oppressed are *also* those who hold positions of privilege and power.

Poverty, captivity and oppression come in many forms.

I know this. I've seen this. I've experienced this.

I've stood alongside those who've lost their jobs—unsure how to make ends meet, pay the bills, and provide for their family. I've *also* stood alongside those deemed “successful” by worldly standards feel *paralyzed* with anxiety, convinced they're imposters, not up to the task.

I've befriended those who've been locked up detention centers, needing legal guidance to navigate their freedom. I've *also* accompanied those who've experienced the sort of bondage that comes with secret addictions, deteriorating mental health, domestic violence, and disintegrating marriages.

I've stood in solidarity with those who've experienced very real oppression from the sins of racism and sexism. I've also sat with those crushed under the weight of clinical depression, debilitating shame, and the death of a child.

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There are all sorts of poverty, oppression, and captivity in this world.

Some are easier to see than others. Some are easier to *name*. Some get more air time.

Sometimes, it's easy to assume if we don't struggle with our bills, if we've never experienced discrimination, if we've never been part of the prison system- then perhaps this text- perhaps today's gospel from Luke- isn't for *us*.

But, as author Anne Kennedy states, [maybe this] “is the worst and most dangerous kind of poverty—to look the Savior of the World in the face and decide that, being neither hungry nor poor, you don't need him.”

You know, one of the things I'm *most* grateful to God for is having the opportunity to be in relationship with people from *all* walks of life.

Folks in homeless shelters *and* students in ivy league schools. Clients in free health clinics *and* congregants in wealthy mainline churches. Neighbors in the inner city and neighbors in the suburbs.

I've had the privilege of walking alongside women being sex-trafficked on the streets of Waikiki and I've had the privilege of walking alongside high-society debutantes preparing for their balls. I've prayed with homeless teenagers, theological scholars, stay-at-home moms, and wall street moguls.

*And do you know what I've learned?*

It doesn't matter *who* we are. We ALL need the gospel that Jesus proclaims “in the power of the Spirit.”

Regardless of our position or place in this world, regardless of our status or titles, regardless of our incomes or academic degrees, we *all* need Jesus to *free* us, and *re-order* our lives.

Every single one of us. All of you. Me too.

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Friends, you don't yet know me. And I don't yet know you. But I *want* to know you. And I want *you* to know me.

And so I want you know, that I say all of this, not only as a pastoral candidate, but also as a fellow follower of Jesus. I say all this as someone who believes in the *gospel* of Jesus, and hopes and lives and breathes in "the *power* of the Spirit."

I also say this as someone who doesn't have all the answers. Right now, I have questions of my own like:

What if I never get to see the wild beauty of New Zealand again?  
and...

How will we manage all the details of a massive international move?  
and...

What if the safety my sons have enjoyed in New Zealand schools (schools that *don't* have active shooter drills) is shattered someday, by a gunman?

These questions are real. So are yours.

Unfortunately, the answer the gospel gives us is *not* a guarantee that everything will come up roses. It's *not* a guarantee that life will shake out how we planned. It's certainly not a guarantee that we'll always feel (or even be) safe, secure, or comfortable.

The Gospel doesn't promise us *any* of those things.

But it does promise us, that the *same* "power of the Spirit" that filled Jesus—fills *us*.

It promises God's Spirit is working in our lives, families, churches, and world even when we can't see, or feel it.

It promises us one day, every tear will be wiped away, every debt will be paid, and every captive will be set *free*.

It promises us one day, *all* that is broken will be *healed*, and all that is *wrong*—will be made *right*.

In the meantime, even as we *work toward*, and *long for* that promised day, we're invited to lean into the unrelenting love of the Breaker of Every Chain, the Cancellor

of Every Debt, the Lifter of Every Head and the Healer of Every Wound: Jesus Christ our Lord.

And of course, I hope that we can do this *together*. I hope that we can work and worship, rest and listen, play and pray and just share life, *together*. I hope that we can serve this *church*, this community, this city, and this world as *partners* in God's Upside-Down kingdom.

By the amazing *grace* of God, with the deep *love* of Jesus, and through the *power* of the *Spirit*, we can.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

*Receive now the Charge and Benediction:*

As you have been fed, go and feed the hungry.

As you have been welcomed, go and welcome the stranger.

As you have been freed, go and free the captives.

And as you have heard the good news, go from this place-- and share it with others- with a spirit of humility and love.

Go, trusting in the promise

That the power of the Spirit

Is upon you, and will show you the way.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen!