

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

January 23, 2022 (3rd Sunday after Epiphany, Year C)
Luke 4:14-21

In his book, Holy Sweat, Tim Hansel tells of a guest preacher in a rather large church who began his sermon like this: “There are three points to my sermon.” Most people yawned at this. They’d heard that MANY times before. But he went on. “My first point is this. At this time there are approximately two billion people starving to death in the world.” The reaction of the congregation was about the same, since they’d heard THAT sort of statement many times before, too.

And then he said, “My second point...”

Everybody sat up. Only 10 seconds had passed, and he was ALREADY on his SECOND point? He paused, then said, “My second point is that most of you don’t GIVE a damn!”

He paused again as gasps and rumblings flowed across the congregation, and then said: “And my third point is that the real TRAGEDY among Christians today is that many of you are now MORE concerned that I said ‘DAMN’ than you are that I said TWO BILLION people are STARVING to death.” Then he sat down.

The whole sermon took less than a minute, but, in many ways, it was one of the BEST sermons he ever gave. He was reminding all of us that we are called, not to mere PIETY, but to genuine MORALITY. We are called to ACTION, NOT to fancy WORDS.

JESUS preached a short sermon too. But WHAT a sermon it was! The most IMPORTANT sermon EVER given. Jesus clearly states the KIND of MINISTRY he came to do, the kind of KINGDOM he would bring, the kind of MESSIAH he would BE.

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.
Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

Our passage begins, “Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit.” And Jesus says, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” What does it MEAN to be “spirit-filled”? We think of nuns in their convents and monks in their monasteries and gurus on their mountaintops. We think about new-age spiritual practices. One of the fastest growing demographics in this country is people who say that they’re “spiritual but not religious,” not affiliated with any particular church, the “nones.” That’s the box they check on their survey: “none.”

What does that even MEAN anyway – “spiritual but not religious”? Does it mean they commune with God when they do yoga or practice zen or meditate on crystals? WHATEVER it is they’re talking about when they say “spiritual,” they usually mean something INDIVIDUAL, something PERSONAL that’s just between ME and God. It’s about MY spiritual journey.

But Jesus seems to have something ELSE in mind. Being filled with the Holy Spirit means caring about OTHER people. Being “spiritual” doesn’t mean ESCAPING the world, but a RADICAL ENGAGEMENT with others, and especially the POOR and OPPRESSED of the world.

Edward Markquart states this in the course Witnesses for Christ:

God’s story is ALWAYS related to human need. For example, if a woman is dying of cancer, the gospel IS God’s strong word of resurrection. If a person is permeated with guilt, the

gospel IS God's assurance of forgiveness. If people experience extreme suffering, the gospel IS the prayer: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble." For the starving, the gospel may be bread. For a homeless refugee, the gospel may be freedom in a new homeland (*or*) freedom from political tyranny. The gospel is ALWAYS related to human need. It is NEVER truth in a VACUUM, a theologically TRUE statement which MAY or may NOT relate to one's life. The gospel is God's truth, God's message, God's ACTION, God's word to a PARTICULAR person, to a particular NEED, to a particular historical SITUATION.

You don't throw a DROWNING person a SANDWICH. However GOOD the sandwich may be, it just DOESN'T MEET that person's need. You throw a drowning person a life jacket, or a lifeline, or you dive in for the rescue. So it is with the gospel.

A story is told about a man who was taking a trip on a cruise liner and he falls overboard. He can't swim and in desperation he begins calling for help. Now it just so happens that there are several WOULD-BE RESCUERS on deck who witnessed the whole thing. The first man was a MORALIST. When he saw the man fall overboard he immediately reached into his briefcase and pulled out a book on how to swim. He tossed it to the man and he yelled: "Now brother, you just read that and follow the instructions and you'll be all right."

The man next to him happened to be an IDEALIST. When he saw the man fall overboard he immediately jumped into the water, and began swimming all AROUND him saying: "Now just watch ME swim. Do as I do and you'll be all right."

The person next to him happened to be a member of the INSTITUTIONAL CHURCH. He looked upon the drowning man's plight with deep concern. He yelled out: "Now, just hold on friend. Help is on the way. We're going to establish a committee and dialogue about your problem. And then, if we come up with the financing, we'll resolve your dilemma."

The next man on deck happened to be from the school of POSITIVE THINKING. He yelled out to the drowning man: "Friend, this situation isn't NEARLY as bad as you think. THINK DRY!"

The next man on board happened to be a REVIVALIST. By this time the drowning man was going down for the third time and desperately began waving his arm. Seeing that, the revivalist yelled out: "Yes brother, I SEE that hand, is there ANOTHER? Is there ANOTHER hand?"

And finally, the last man on deck was a REALIST. He jumped into the water, and at the risk of his OWN life, PULLED the man to safety.

JESUS would say THAT man was a "spiritual" person, because he recognized a person's need and DID something about it.

According to Jesus, being filled with the spirit means RELEASING people from whatever has captured or oppressed them. That would seem to include those in prison, those in bondage to addictions, those oppressed by ABUSIVE situations.

One of the things I love about the church is that it takes that call SERIOUSLY. To the prisoners it offers prison ministers. To those held captive by addiction, it has AA groups. To those held captive to loneliness, WE bring Communion ministers and Communion worship in the nursing home. To those in bondage to poverty and homelessness, we have the Food Shelf and Community Meals, and to the WORLD with our quilts. And so many OTHER ministries to those oppressed by life circumstances.

All of these problems seem TOO BIG for us to do anything about it, but if you ask anyone INVOLVED in those ministries, they will tell you the same thing – that it begins with ONE person. That's where we make a DIFFERENCE in this world – ONE person at a time.

It's been a month since our celebration of Jesus' BIRTH at Christmas. Howard Thurman wrote a wonderfully challenging poem called "The WORK of Christmas." Now that we're starting to grasp the IMPLICATIONS of God's invasion of the world in the Word made flesh, the 3rd Sunday after Epiphany seems like a good time to hear it again.

When the song of the angels is stilled,

when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the WORK of Christmas begins:

to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.

Dear Christians, EACH one of you is FILLED with the Holy Spirit. THIS is your calling. Show that you give a darn. Jump into the water. Make a difference. "Today this scripture has been FULFILLED in your HEARING," because it's fulfilled in YOU. Amen.