



## Returning Home: The Spirit of the Lord is Upon Me

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin*

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany ~ January 24, 2010

Luke 4:14-21

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 favour.’

And he 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.’

When my family moved to Manhattan for my father to begin a new job as vicar of the Church of St. Luke in the Fields, I was entering seventh grade. My sister and brother, both younger than I, joined the girl and boy choir respectively. I was too old to join the choir as a boy and too young to join as an adult, so I became an acolyte. Our liturgy there was full of ritual – lots of processions and bowing and chanting – and I especially enjoyed helping with the incense. Our parents expected us to be in church every Sunday, and for the most part I liked being there well enough. When I left for boarding school in tenth grade, I never again spent any consistent time at St. Luke’s, just when I returned home for vacations. In time, of course, I went on to college and set off on my own.

When I came back during those vacation visits, I always knew I was home. Often, it was embarrassing; little old ladies with comments such as, “my how you’ve grown” practically pinching my cheeks; disapproving looks with my long afro hair everywhere, or earning approval when I showed up in a suit. Of course, this was the West Village and the corner of Christopher Street in the 1970’s so we had a variation on old ladies, with pairs of guys in black leather chaps and vests, draped in shiny chains. I was confirmed in that church, and ordained there too; I expect when he dies, my father’s funeral will be held there.

I am wondering about the connections between church and home. For some of us, for some of you, this church may be synonymous with home. You or your children or grandchildren were baptized here, or you were married here, or you found comfort here at a time of pain and crisis in your life, or more subtly, this has been a place where you could gather yourself together, find a little solace and courage for the stuff you have to face. I know from passing comments and experience that there are countless people in this neighborhood, unknown to me and to you, for whom St. Peter’s is home; our spire, a ray of hope; our churchyard, an oasis of calm; our quiet

light-filled sanctuary, a place of safety and holiness.

The church as home took on a deeper meaning for me when I served at a church which opened its parish hall to provide housing for forty homeless men each night. Aware of those men sleeping in long rows of cots, side by side, stashing their belongings in our wooden lockers during the day, I wondered what it was to have no home.... How grateful I am for the basic gifts of a home, where I can go into my room if I want, to think or read or dream, or I can invite friends over for dinner, or turn the heat up or turn it down.... I am mindful today of all those in Haiti who have no home at all, too many of whom have no one at all. I am mindful, too, that for many home or church home is not all its cracked up to be; a place where addiction or aggression rage, a place of crippling regression where we return to our most base and beastly selves.

In this morning's Gospel we are told of the time when Jesus returned home, to the synagogue where he had worshiped as a boy. In Luke's telling, we are at the beginning of the story. Jesus is a young man who only recently set out. He was baptized by John in the river Jordan, after which he was led by the Spirit out in to the wilderness where he spent forty days and nights and was tempted by Satan – setting off, as it were, as so many of us do, to find himself, to discover what he was going to do with his life, who he was going to be. The text reports “when the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time,” and it continues, as we just read, “Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee.... When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom.”

I wonder why Jesus went home just then. Of course, if you spend forty days out in the wilderness, fasting, and doing battle with the devil, a good home-cooked meal and a familiar bed probably sound pretty good. But I wonder if Jesus had a plan. I wonder if he knew yet who he was going to be, what he was going to do. His start in life was different from most, what with magi showing up, and the voice of God thundering out of the sky at his baptism, squaring off with the devil. But that's also the kind of stuff a lot of folks deal with in their late teens and early twenties. I think Jesus had a hunch, and it was starting to come together for him, but I don't think he really knew yet what was in store; I don't think he had a plan. He may have wanted a little reassurance.

So he came home, and he went to the synagogue – as was his custom. And they knew him there; the old ladies pinched his cheeks, and were concerned at how much weight he'd lost out in the desert. Whatever similarities there may have been between Jesus' home synagogue and ours, or St. Peter's, there was one certain distinction: Nazareth was a really poor little village, and the Romans had been occupying the country for decades now. Jesus' family and friends were making do the best they could, but life was hard and short, what profit they made was taxed right out of their mouths, the patrols were brutal; they were prisoners in their own land.

Maybe Jesus swaggered into that synagogue and said, listen up people, there's a new messiah in town, and I've been deputized by God. But I don't think so. I think he just returned, as you and I might return. And they gave him a passage to read – from the prophet Isaiah, about “the Spirit of the Lord being upon me,” and “bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, letting the oppressed go free.” And he read it. And then he sat down. And he looked around at the worn and expectant faces. And then it came to him – a bolt of awareness more powerful than God's voice at his baptism: this is what I need to do, this is who God is calling me to be, this is what it's all about. So he told them, “today, these words are fulfilled in your hearing;” the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, and I shall be the one the prophet has called. And then he just sat there trembling.

Because when we return to our home church, there is the very real possibility that we will discern who it is that we are to be, what it is that we are to do; we will hear God's vision for this world and discern our part, hear our call, our mission, in living it out. When we return to our home church – literally, or perhaps a sanctuary special in our lives – we may well discover the very essence of our being as a child of God, and we may discover anew what that love of God calls us to be; a mantle of responsibility is placed upon our shoulders, a charge is given, a vision – and your part in it. Jesus didn't swagger in and swagger out, full of grand pronouncements. Jesus sat there in a cold sweat, reeling with the implications, feeling simultaneously very puny and absolutely unstoppable, like a small flame about to burst into blazing fire.

These words of Isaiah, more than any other, define the work that Jesus went on to do. Jesus set off to bring about the Kingdom of God, not as some heavenly kingdom in the sky bye and bye, but with a radical restructuring of society as a heavenly commonwealth here on earth, in this life. The words he read in the synagogue were from the 61st chapter of Isaiah; the full picture is given shortly after, in chapter 65 (vs.17-25).

“For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth” says the Lord; “I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy.”

And what will it look like, this new place? Isaiah paints a picture with specifics:

“No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress.” A place, then, of comfort, of

compassion, and abundance. Can we strive for this place? Can we help create it?

“No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime.” Sounds to me like good health care, for everyone. And no shootings, no war. Can we bring this about?

“They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. 22They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat.” So the banks will not red-line certain districts, the supermarkets will build in every neighborhood; Food Cupboards will be obsolete; for the rich will not be able to hoard all the wealth and every family will be able to earn a decent wage.

“They shall not labour in vain, or bear children for calamity;\* for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord — and their descendants as well.

“The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; they shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.”

This, my friends, is the word of God that is given to us; for each of us to find a way, our part, in bringing this vision to fulfillment. We’ve each got a unique role to play. We’ve each been blessed with different gifts, different abilities. As Paul reminds us (in I Corinthians 12:12-27), one is the hand, another the ears, another the knees; one serves, another listens; one strategizes, another prays. As a body, no limb or part is worth much on its own; its value and grace comes through coordinated relationship with the others. What good is a hand without an arm? What good is a dream without the will and the determination to bring it into being?!

It’s true that when you go home, they’ll likely pinch your cheek, tell embarrassing stories of when you were a child. But it may just be the place where you come to know who it is you are called to be, what it is you are called to do; for the Spirit of the Lord is upon you: it is for you to create the kingdom, the commonwealth, of God, in your life, in this city, on this day, with the gifts God has given you to share.

On our own, it is impossible. But in Christ Jesus, all things are possible. So, as one body in Christ, let us accept that mantle, and let us go forth in joy.