

In this Epiphany season we have been looking for divine signs our gospel lessons and our lives as well. Three weeks ago it was the Magi visiting the household of Mary, Joseph and Jesus. That was a divine sign. Two weeks ago it was the heavens opening up at the baptism of Jesus and the divine proclamation “This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well!” That was a divine sign. We noted that the divine works in our lives as we make commitments like Jesus did at his baptism. Last week we saw a divine sign at a wedding in Cana of Galilee as Jesus turned water into wine. In that lesson we acknowledged the sacred in our midst as we invite Jesus into the various aspects of our lives and oftentimes find the pleasantly unexpected emerging. This week the divine sign is found in the words of Jesus after he reads from the Holy Scripture of Hebrew prophets at his hometown synagogue.

Let’s look at the gospel lesson verse by verse as we start with Luke 4:14 that states, “Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee...”

I think that Jesus was filled with the power of the Spirit because of what happened to him at his baptism and then through his temptation experience. At his baptism we are told the Spirit of God came upon Jesus and the Divine presence declared “this is my Son, with whom I am well pleased.” Now that would charge your batteries wouldn’t it? We are all filled with energy when we receive sincere words of affirmation from another.

Jesus’ heard words of affirmation from God Almighty and he was filled with power. That makes sense to me. Yet, in addition to that I believe Jesus was filled with the power of the Spirit because of his temptation experience which is recorded in the thirteen verses just before our gospel lesson. Think about overcoming temptation. My simple definition of temptation is opportunities available to us that seem appealing on one level or another but in the end are counter-productive or even damaging. A couple of examples; the big exam grade only read 82% but the student beams as she gives the tests results to her parents because she studied, did her best, and passed up an easy opportunity to cheat. She feels the power of the Spirit in doing her best without cheating. Or the student knows his buddies are true friends as they joke about him being their “chauffer” as they go out drinking and one more time he chooses not to drink and serves as the designated driver. Their friendship and safety is more important to him than the chance to indulge in under-age drinking. As he returns home safe and sound he feels the power of the Spirit.

We are told that Jesus is filled with the power of the Spirit. This statement is made directly following his forty days in the wilderness. In that time period Jesus confronts various temptations.

As he overcame each temptation he experienced a special joy and strength. I believe the dynamic at work in Jesus that filled him with power is true for us as well. After each temptation that we resist we find that our relationship with God, others, and even ourselves is strengthened. The power of the Spirit grows in us as it did in Jesus.

Verse 15, “He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.”

Jesus is moving from town to town and his preaching most likely included his recent experiences:

- the message of John the Baptist that he was carrying to a new level
- the power over temptation that he experienced in the wilderness
- how the words of scripture point to the Chosen One of God
- the ushering in of the kingdom of God

Luke notes that his teaching was praised by everyone.

Verse 16, “When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom...”

Jesus returned to his hometown. What does Jesus do while he was at home?

He went to the synagogue, the place of study and worship. Did you hear that? Where did Jesus whom God called “my Son, the Beloved” and who we call Lord and Savior go on the Sabbath? Yes, that’s right, to worship.

If anybody could sleep in or be otherwise occupied on the Sabbath, it was Jesus. If Jesus was in the synagogue for study, worship and fellowship think of how much we need to be here each and every week.

Verses 16-17. “He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him.”

Although we do not know exactly all that happened in worship at the synagogue at that point in time the following elements were probably present:

- The Shema, Ten Commandments, were recited
- Prayers and singing of the Psalms
- Reading the scripture and explanation shared
- Final blessing and benediction

Various people might have been asked to read and share in the teachings. Since the reputation of Jesus as a great teacher preceded him there were many who were excited to hear him teach. The Hazzan, or assistant, would have handed Jesus the scroll. He probably read the Hebrew text and then gave his interpretation in Aramaic, the language of his place and time.

Verses 17-18. “He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it is written; ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor and He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free...’”

Jesus chooses these passages from the prophet Isaiah to give description to his ministry. He declares that the recipients of the good news are to be the poor, imprisoned, blind and oppressed. This echoes the words of Mary when she is pregnant with Jesus and she is visiting Elizabeth who is pregnant with John. Remember the Magnificat in the first chapter of Luke that praises the Lord for lifting up the lowly?

Jesus, like Mary, seems to be talking about the economically poor and not those who are metaphorically “poor in spirit.” We can understand this as we compare the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Plain in Luke over against the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. In Matthew Jesus says “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (Mt. 5:3) whereas in Luke Jesus says “Blessed are you who are poor.” (Lk. 6:20) In Matthew Jesus says “Blessed are those that hunger and thirst for righteousness.” (Mt. 5:6) whereas in Luke Jesus says “Blessed are you who are hungry now” (Lk. 6:21). Matthew talks in spiritual terms whereas Luke talks in literal terms.

Those who are literally poor figure more prominently in Jesus’ teachings in the gospel of Luke more than in any other gospel (Luke 14:13, 14:21, 16:19-31, 18:18-22, 21:1-4).

This seems to place upon us (who are not economically poor, captive, blind or oppressed) a unique calling. If we are to live in the power of the Spirit then our endeavors must frequently be among the poor, captive, blind and oppressed. Such journeys begin with our support of our church members who travel to Guatemala each year to build stoves for the poor in remote mountainous settings, volunteering at Sienna Francis serving meals the first Tuesday of each month, giving first fruits to the Living Hope food pantry, and participating in the many like-minded endeavors that our Mercy and Justice provide for us throughout the year. In such activities we begin to live in the power of the Spirit. If it is among the poor, captive, blind and oppressed that Christ is proclaiming the good news then it behooves us to be integrally connected to such dynamics if we are truly to live in the power of the spirit.

Verse 19. “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

This reference originally tied in with Leviticus 25 where God declared through Moses that every fifty years all wealth and resources are to be redistributed so all are once again on equal economic footing. Jesus seems to relate the “year of the Lord’s favor” to the kingdom of God (Luke 4:43).

Verse 20 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.”

It was the custom, as is ours, to stand during the reading of the scripture. Then all sat down, including the speaker. What folks expected from Jesus after the reading was a message much like I am doing this morning.

This passage from Isaiah was making reference to the Messiah. People expected Jesus, the hometown carpenter, to talk about the Messiah. Word had spread that he was even a better teacher than he was a carpenter. Expectations were high for this teacher, that is, rabbi.

Verse 21. “Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’”

Jesus was not teaching about these verses from Isaiah but he was declaring that the verses were teaching about him. He was the Messiah upon whom the spirit of the Lord rested. You can imagine that these folk who had watched Jesus grow as a child, teen and young adult sat in stunned silence as they heard his declaration.

Just like the hometown folk in Nazareth we need to decide who Jesus is in our lives. Is Jesus our Messiah, Lord and Savior?

-As we claim Jesus as Messiah the power of the Spirit will strengthen us to address temptation as Jesus did.

-As we claim Jesus as Messiah the Spirit will lead us to worship as was the custom for Jesus.

-As we claim Jesus as Messiah the Spirit will lead us to the needy in whose midst God is present.

-As we claim Jesus as Messiah we too will be anointed by the Spirit of the Lord.

Let's celebrate the power of the Spirit in our lives as we contemplate and claim Jesus as our Messiah.