

14 Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside.

15 He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

16 He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. 17 The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,

because he has anointed me

to preach good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners

and recovery of sight for the blind,

to release the oppressed,

19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

20 Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, 21 and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Bold, pushy, confident, presumptuous, daring, courageous, bossy, wise, foolish—we can imagine that the folks sitting in the synagogue that day might have used any or all of these words to describe Jesus when he proclaimed that the scripture had been fulfilled in their hearing, indeed that HE was the prophesy fulfilled. This was Jesus, the kid who had played with their kids; Jesus, whose dad had helped to build their home; Jesus, whose mother Mary lived next door; Jesus, the fellow who, until about fifty days before had worked in the carpenter's shop down the street—Jesus—that same Jesus, and here he was, taking a scroll from the rabbi, reading it, and claiming that he is the one that it was written about. "Really Jesus, Jesus son of Joseph, Jesus whose swaddling clothes I used to change, YOU are the one who has been anointed to preach good news to the poor, proclaim freedom to the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind. Really, Jesus, really?"

And one can understand why the people would be suspicious—it was a bold thing that Jesus did. Folks in our society who proclaim that they are the Messiah end up on the cover of the National Enquirer or in mental health facilities. Surely such a claim wouldn't have sounded any less outrageous in Jesus' time than it does now. But, knowing what we know now about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we lose sight of the impact, the audacity, of what Jesus said and did in this, one of the earliest moments in his public ministry. But, none of his listeners knew then what we know now. And so it makes sense that they would question him, doubt him, try to silence him for "his own sake", and really, just try to put the whole nasty incident behind them.

Surely Jesus must have known how they would react and so we might wonder how he could put his reputation, his integrity and his future at risk? How could he stand there and set himself up to be the target of anger, humiliation, and misunderstanding? How did he walk right into the synagogue, take the scroll from the rabbi—someone who could very easily have been his teacher when he was young—read it, make his declaration, and then sit right back down as if what he had done was the most natural thing in the world?

How did he do it? The answer lies in the first part of his declaration, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me." And how did he know that the Lord's spirit was upon him? He knew because of what he had just survived—40 days in the wilderness without food, companionship or shelter. Forty days of hardship during which he was tempted three times by Satan with Jesus resisting each of the temptations. Though no one knew of his victory in the desert, of his amazing will power, or his commitment to doing nothing more and nothing less than what God called him to do—an amazing thing came of those forty days of wandering, hungering, thirsting, and being tested—Jesus came of those 40 days—not the Jesus who used to play in the streets of Nazareth or who helped his dad build tables—but the Jesus who was fit to be a savior, a messiah, a Jesus who was able to walk into a room of scholars and priests, former playmates and family friends—and proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind and release to the oppressed.

He was able to do what he did because he'd been pushed, during his 40 days in the wilderness—he'd been pushed to the limits of his patience, his body had been pushed to the limits of hunger and exhaustion, his brain had been pushed to the limits of understanding and comprehension, and his spirit had been pushed to the limits of temptations. And each time he resisted evil's push, each time he stopped, turned away from Satan, and made a better choice—each time he was pushed, he grew stronger, he grew wiser, he grew into the knowledge that he was, indeed, the one through whom and by whom scripture would be fulfilled. He'd been pushed, he'd been tried, and he had survived. And because he did, he knew that the spirit of God was upon him.

And it was this knowledge, his knowledge of who and whose he was that allowed him to take a big risk in the temple that day. To stand in front of family and friends—to risk their ridicule and rejection—he did it because he knew that this life is not as good as it gets. He knew that he was the one who had been anointed to proclaim the good news and he couldn't let his fears of what other people might think of him stand in the way of what he knew God was calling him to do. I am reminded of something a professor said in one of my courses this past summer when she was talking about leadership. She said that a leader must love her people enough to be willing to give up their love for her. Again, a leader must love his people enough to be willing to give up their love for him. And this is what Jesus did time and time again, loved people so much that he was willing to give up their love for him and it started that day in the synagogue in Nazareth and it continued when his family tried to get him to stop with his ministry because he was embarrassing them and it continued when he went into the temple in Jerusalem and threw over the tables of the merchants and it continued when the crowds turned their backs on him and instead of shouting "Hosanna, glory to God in the highest" they began shouting "crucify him, crucify him" and in spite of their betrayal and hostility Jesus loved them enough to give up their love for him, loved them enough to face humiliation and torture, loved them enough—loved us enough—loved us this much, enough to save us.

And when a person is able to give up the love of this world, to give up the love of people she loves so dearly in order to pursue the love of the kingdom of God, what makes that possible is nothing other than having that sense, that conviction that indeed the spirit of God is upon you. And it is, the spirit is upon you, the Holy Spirit is with you, so that you too can appear to be bold, pushy, confident, presumptuous, daring, courageous, bossy, wise, foolish—whatever it is that people might say about you when you do the thing God is calling you to do. And how do you know what it is that God is calling you to do? Well, it's likely the thing that is the most difficult to do, it's likely the thing that you'll do because you love the people so much that you're willing to give up their love for you, it's likely the thing that, in the long run, is best for others even though it comes at a huge price for you. It's the father who turns away his addict son because he loves him enough to stop enabling his habit. It's the politician who votes his conscience instead of whatever would get him re-elected. It's the teacher who does what's best for the student even though it will hurt the classroom average on the standardized test score. It's the teenager who leaves the lunch table of popular kids to go sit by the kid who always sits alone. It's the senior citizen who refuses to join in the gossip even though it's what everyone else is doing. It's the corporate executive who turns down a bonus so that none of the employees are laid off. It's anyone who does anything that proclaims good news to those who are treated poorly, recovery of sight to those who are blinded by the temptations of this world, freedom to those who are captive to the status quo, and release to those who are oppressed by the myth of scarcity and the need to keep up with the Joneses. And you can do it, I know you can. Because you have been pushed, you've been tempted and tried, and you have survived. God has made you strong for this moment, for this challenge, for this choice—whatever the choice may be. The spirit of the Lord is upon you. Thanks be to God.