

ON RAGE AND OUTRAGE

LUKE 4:14-30

Warning: the Spirit of the Lord is inflammatory. It is disruptive. Meaning: it may lead to anger, disorder or tumult. It is seditious, and this Spirit swells among us.

John was full of it, and so was Elijah. Read the first chapter of Luke. An angel of the Lord appears to Zechariah, and Zechariah is terrified. The angel says, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit.” The same Spirit that filled Elijah fills John: “With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” The Spirit disrupts, inflames and enrages through prophets like Elijah and baptizers like John.

Much of the Spirit’s work in the beginning of Luke is obstetrics. The Spirit accompanies the angel who visits Elizabeth, and then it accompanies the angel who visits Mary. When Mary asks tough questions about the nature of her pregnancy, the angel refers her to the Spirit. The explanation given is, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called the Son of God.” Now if I am Mary and the angel says this to me, I would have to ask, “If this baby will be the Son of God, who does that make me?” But she does not. Or if she does, this question is edited out of the tradition.

Following this grand introduction, babies are being born one-after-another, and the Spirit is there even when angels are not. As soon as John is born, his father Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit. Angels are in Bethlehem when Jesus is born, and when he is presented in the temple, the Spirit is

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there with Simeon. The Spirit abides with Jesus and John, as Jesus prepares for, and participates in, ministry, and John prepares the way for Jesus to take center stage in the drama unfolding in Luke.

And this transition---this turning, this changing of the guard---happens at Jesus' baptism, during which the Holy Spirit descends upon him like a dove. In this instant, the Spirit stops hovering. All the bobbing-and-weaving of the previous chapters comes to an end. The Spirit now has a bodily form, and yet it is both "in" and "beyond" Jesus' body and blood.

This past Sunday, we thought, felt and prayed our way through the story in which Jesus, who is "full of the Holy Spirit," is "led by the Spirit" into the wilderness where he is tempted by the devil. Yes, the Spirit leads him into temptation (a truth that I understand led at least two of you to Krispy Kreme before bedtime last Sunday).

The same Spirit that leads Jesus into temptation leads him out. Then Jesus, "filled with the power of the Spirit," returns to Galilee. There he begins teaching in the synagogue and is "praised by everyone." Usually, when somebody is being praised by everyone, I am suspicious. I am waiting on the other shoe to drop, and the Gospel of Luke gives us a question to ask that will expedite the process: What are they saying about this person at home?

Jesus' wilderness experience in Nazareth is almost as brutal as being tempted by the devil. At least one of the temptations is similar. Being told "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure thyself!'" is not that different from being told "If you are the Son of God, throw down yourself here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against the stone.'" The devil and the doubters ask for proof, proof that is defined in terms of protection and healing, and yet on the subjects of protection and healing, Jesus is convinced that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

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Only God knows if Jesus remembers his baptism as he stands before his people in the synagogue, but we remember Jesus' baptism, because it sets in motion this series of Spirit-filled and Spirit-led stories by which Jesus' ministry in Galilee, Nazareth and Capernaum is defined. Luke tells the story brilliantly: "When he (Jesus) 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 to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the captives go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.' 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.'" Wow!

In this brief statement, Jesus says, "This is who I am. This is what I am here to do," and everybody understands what he says better because of his actions. This is Jesus' statement of faith. What would you say if you were asked to write one? This is Jesus' mission statement. What is ours? Has God given you such clarity of vision and strength of purpose? Has God given this to others? How clear is too clear? How strong is too strong? At what point do you become suspicious?

Jesus' proclamation is incredibly bold. He says that he is the one who will deliver Zion. The question that Luke answers before it is ever asked is, "Which Scripture is fulfilled in the people's hearing?"

Sometimes it is not what we say but when we say it. Wake Forest Dean and Adjunct Professor of Religion Linda McKinnish Bridges points out that this "scene has particular potency, if Jesus is standing before his hometown crowd in the year of jubilee," and "jubilee" refers to a practice in which: "Every fifty years, the fields rested and were reinvigorated for future harvests. In this jubilee year, debts were forgiven. People returned home. Slaves were set free," and this is how Jesus defines ministry.

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Sometimes it is not what we say but where we say it. Jesus' bold proclamation is being made in a sacred place. God's covenant people have gathered to hear the Word of the Lord, and what Jesus says fills them not with the Spirit but with rage. Who does he think he is...talking about forgiving debt and setting prisoners free...in this economy? Actually, that is the problem: he thinks that the Spirit of the Lord is upon him and that he is the Anointed One.

Sometimes it is not what we say but to whom we say it. Many of those gathered in the synagogue remember Jesus as a boy, and Mary's story may have been being told behind-the-scenes, but it was not being told publicly. So, for Jesus to be making bold pronouncements to people who knew him before he was baptized and to people who had not experienced healing like those in Capernaum is absurd.

Sometimes it is not what we say but how we say it. The truth is the truth. Say it, step back and watch the Spirit work. This is one option. Another is to recognize that truth is filtered through the person who speaks it and again through the person or persons who hear it. Elsewhere, Scripture exhorts us to speak the truth in love, because it helps members of Christ's body to grow up. I suspect that there were those in the synagogue who think that they are helping Jesus to mature, at least until he brings up Elijah.

Remember Elijah is full of it--the Spirit that is---for he is the one who remembered widows when there was a severe famine in the land. That prophet's judgment was not appreciated, and his story is an embarrassment and a constant reminder of Israel's unfaithfulness to God.

Remember what Luke says about Elijah in the beginning of the narrative: "With the spirit and power of Elijah, John will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Led by the Spirit---into and out of temptation---Jesus is filled with the power of the Spirit as he turns the hearts of

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parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, and it fills all in the synagogue with rage.

For some, saying, "Goodbye," to their native son is enough. For others, this Jesus is even worse than John and must be thrown from a cliff, but Jesus understands himself as only passing through, and there is grace in this. The story ends with Jesus passing through the midst of them and going on his way. He has traveled this path before. He will travel this path again. This will not be the last time that he experiences rage, because he is filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. On him, the Spirit has descended. By the Spirit, he is led. By the Spirit, he is empowered. With this power, he inflames. To the blessed and only Sovereign who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

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