

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Exercising Power

Luke 4:14-21

When Joe Biden took the oath of office this past Wednesday, he placed his hand on a Bible that's been an heirloom in his side of the family. Biden's copy of the Scriptures is 127 years old, about five inches thick, with a sturdy leather cover, and solid metal clasps holding it closed. Every time Biden has been sworn in for anything, the date has been inscribed in that Bible. Robert Briggs, president and CEO of the American Bible Society, said of Biden, "He's not only undergirding his oath of office with the Bible but saying it reflects the essence of who he is, and his family heritage, and his own faith."¹

Biden certainly isn't the first one to let the Scriptures say something about his identity and purpose. Our Lord Jesus, who occupies the seat of highest authority and rules over this world's rulers, took a scroll that was handed to him, unrolled it to a text from the prophet Isaiah, and announced the inauguration of his mission. "The Spirit of the Lord is on me," began the day's Bible passage. A couple of verses later, Jesus was finished with the reading. The media team rolled the screen back up and turned off the projector. Folks in the church pews, and those on their sofas watching the livestream from home, waited to hear what Jesus would say.

The first word out of his mouth was "Today." "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (v. 21). Things have changed. Something is here now that wasn't here before. And that something, says Jesus, is the reign of God, the time when God's promises are being fulfilled and God's purposes are coming to fruition. The time when God's agenda for his people and for the world gets implemented. A time when the sick get healed. A time when the blind get to see. A time when the deaf get to hear. A time when the hungry get fed. A time when the economically disadvantaged get raised up. A time when the financially dominant get brought down. A time when those who have been mistreated, neglected, or discriminated against get justice. A time when all those who are oppressed, in whatever form, get set free. "Today" is the time, says Jesus. Not yesterday. Not tomorrow. Today.

This no doubt came as uplifting news to the congregation. They had been through enough suffering, hardship, and mistreatment to recognize good news when they heard it. According to Luke, "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips" (v. 22). Remember that Jesus was a local boy, one of their own. And now here he was, all grown up, reading Scripture in public, interpreting the word of God for the people of God. His reputation had spread. His followers on social media were multiplying by the minute. If it were election season, Jesus would have won by a landslide. By this point, folks in Nazareth were ready to take him out and give him an inaugural parade.

But all that soon changed. In the text right after today's reading, we learn that the congregation turned on Jesus. When he started describing how God's kingdom was more inclusive than they had planned, and God's grace more expansive than what they wanted, the people hauled him out of the sanctuary, chased him to the edge of town, and tried to kill him. Turns out that announcing the arrival of God's agenda is one thing; Actually

implementing it is another. That's why Luke's Gospel doesn't end after Jesus' inaugural sermon. First, we get to hear Jesus say what the gospel is. Then as his ministry unfolds we get to see what the gospel is, as it takes shape at ground level in the lives of real people and real communities. This is what it looks like when the Spirit of the Lord is released into the world.

It's not as if the Spirit has been on pause and suddenly moves back into action when Jesus preaches his inaugural sermon. According to Luke, the Spirit has been operating throughout the story. Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist's preaching points to baptism with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism. Jesus is filled with the Spirit and led by the Spirit into and through his temptations in the wilderness. And today's text begins with Jesus returning to Galilee "in the power of the Spirit" (v. 14). So we see that the story of what God has done and is doing through Jesus can't be told without the presence and power of the Spirit.

That's as true now as it was then. Jesus' presence and work through the Spirit is what links our ongoing story with the story told in the Scriptures. We're part of that community of disciples whom Luke describes as being "clothed with power from on high" (24:48; cf. Acts 1:8). The Spirit of the Lord is upon us. That means we as a congregation have the guidance, provision, and empowerment we need in order to do our part in the ongoing ministry of Christ.

Remember that we're not out there on our own, trying to figure out how to proclaim and practice the gospel. Jesus himself is present and active, working to implement the kingdom that has already been inaugurated through his death and resurrection. As others have stressed, "Jesus does not now sit in heaven with his arms folded waiting for us to do something religious that he can affirm."² No, Jesus is carrying out his continuing ministry in the world. That's who the Holy Spirit is. The Holy Spirit isn't some mysterious, nebulous, invisible force that we try to harness for our agenda. The Holy Spirit is Jesus' way of being present, here and now, incorporating us into his agenda.

And with the agenda comes the power to implement it. This is the Spirit, the life and power of Jesus, operating in us and through us. One person tells a story about a visit to the Grand Coulee Dam in the state of Washington. He says:

... my family and I were surprised to see that the visitor's center was dark. It was a sunny day, so we thought the center might have tinted windows, but as we got closer we realized there were no lights on. We went in and saw that none of the displays were working. Suddenly it became clear: there was no power to the center. Due to a technical difficulty of some kind, the visitor's center that sat only hundreds of feet from a hydroelectric dam had no power.

How could something be so close to the power source, yet not be "plugged in"?³

As we continue to navigate our way through the coronavirus pandemic, maybe part of what can happen is that we'll reconnect with the Holy Spirit as the source of power for our mission and ministry as a congregation. When things in our church are running normally and operating pretty smoothly, as they were up until about ten months ago, it's easy to take for granted the source of our life together. We're prone to slip into self-reliance and complacency, thinking that all we have is of our own doing. But when our text opens with, "Jesus returned to Galilee *in the power of the Spirit*," and then he reads a passage of Scripture that begins, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me," we're reminded of how we have to stay plugged in at all times, especially circumstances like these.

The good news is that the Holy Spirit empowers us as a church for both inward fellowship and outward witness. One of the ways that the Lord is personally and powerfully present is in our network of relatedness in the congregation. In other words, the Spirit both creates our unity and inhabits our unity. True, in one respect, our unity is weakened by the fact that we can't be together in-person at this present time. Earlier this month, for instance, we couldn't gather to break the bread, share the cup, and sing "Blest Be the Tie." But the Spirit was, and still is, upon us in all the other ways that you help maintain the blessed tie of Christian connectedness, through listening to our online preaching, through prayer for one another, through giving, through phone calls, cards, electronic communications, and other expressions of Christian compassion and care. The power of the Spirit is partly the power to bind us together inwardly as a community of disciples.

But the power of the Spirit is also the power to make us a vibrant and prophetic witness outwardly, so that the transforming power of the gospel becomes visible to the world in our life together. The story is told about a minister named Al who was pursuing a doctoral degree in theology. He worked long hours on his dissertation. So many hours, in fact, that his children often entered the study to interrupt. "Daddy, can you come out and play?" "Sorry, kids," he replied, "I have too much work to do."

"What are you working on, Daddy?" He couldn't really give the title of his dissertation, which was something like "the experiential dimension of the divine pneumatological reality." So he said, "I'm writing about experiences of the Holy Spirit." They looked at him with blank faces and said, "What's that?"

One day Al and his family were sitting in church. They weren't expecting much that morning. The pastor was soft-spoken and meek. He never said anything very clearly, but everybody liked him. But this particular Sunday was different. The pastor stood up and preached a powerful sermon on racial equality. This was during the sixties, in the South, in a white, middle and upper class congregation. People sat transfixed as the preacher laid his career on the line, perhaps even laid his life on the line. "The day is coming," he said, "when all God's children, white and black, will join hands in worship and service. And that day is upon us."

The congregation left in shock. People couldn't understand how their mild, housebroken preacher could suddenly have been filled with such fire. On the way home, it occurred to Al what had happened. "Kids," he said, "remember how sometimes I go up to my study to write about the Holy Spirit?" One of the children said, "Yeah, but Daddy, what's the Holy Spirit all about?" Al said, "We got a good picture today, in church."

The Spirit of the Lord was upon that preacher. The Spirit of the Lord is upon us. We too are given power to proclaim God's far-reaching, boundary-breaking grace that binds people together across seemingly insurmountable divides. Right now, the pandemic continues. Social unrest continues. But our mission and ministry continue as well, because the living Lord, who governs all things, has inaugurated a kingdom that never ends, and he uses us to make his saving agenda a reality.

¹ Daniel Silliman, "Biden's Big Bible Is Heavy with History, Symbolism." Christianity Today website. January 19, 2021. Accessed January 20, 2021 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/january/biden-bible-big-oath-office-catholic-history.html>>.

² Andrew Purves, *The Resurrection of Ministry: Serving in the Hope of the Risen Lord* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2010) 44. Purves attributes this image to Karl Barth.

³ Paul Dawson. Preaching Today website. Accessed January 21, 2021 <<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2001/january/12762.html>>.