

*Celebrating the Journey:
The Joy of God is Your Strength!*

Rev. Pat Bumgardner
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Nehemias 8:2-10
Luke 4: 14-21

“Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. Jesus began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. Upon coming to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, Jesus went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was customary. Jesus stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. Jesus unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ‘The Spirit of God is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to those who cannot see, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then Jesus began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”’”

Will you pray with me? [Prayer]

After being baptized in the River Jordan, by a man Luke records as Jesus’ cousin, the heavens open up this Gospel says, and the Spirit of God descends upon a praying Jesus – and he hears a voice saying:

*You are my Child,
I love you...
And am pleased with you.*

And filled with that same Spirit, Jesus is then led into the desert where he meets Satan, who tests and tries and tempts him for 40 days.

Richard Rohr, a Jesuit, says it’s a very classic initiation scene: someone faces trial, temptation and emerges with a new identity and sense of mission or purpose. Jesus meets Satan who tempts him mostly to doubt who he is. If you are the Child of God, tempts him to doubt God really cares anything about him. You know, they say abandonment, that sense that no one’s there or really cares about me, really cares whether I live or die, whether I make it or not, is at the heart of a great many of our struggles with addictions of all kinds, from drugs and alcohol and sex compulsion to overeating and overworking. All the kinds of things we do to cover up or mask sometimes momentarily at least, numb our pain. All the thing we do to make it look like we’re ok, and it doesn’t really matter anyway, I’m strong; and I can take care of myself.

Jesus, too, even in the power of the Holy Spirit, even having heard that voice of God saying clearly, “I care, you are mine,” had his demons to wrestle with but somehow he emerges from that experience with his Spirit intact, Luke says, filled with the power of the Spirit. He returns from the desert to Galilee, to his hometown of Nazareth, and as was his custom, went to the synagogue on the Sabbath and standing, he reads from the prophet Isaiah’s 61st chapter, the part where it says: “The Spirit of God is upon me ~

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God has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor.” Isaiah was writing (like Nehemiah in that first reading) to a people newly returning from the horrors of exile and enslavement (although writing at different perspectives in history, their experiences were not that dissimilar). Gone were the city’s walls, people’s houses, their businesses and means of survival.

I read where the government of Angola bulldozed a section of its’ capital city, Luanda, a section where poor people live to make way for luxury housing units that begin at \$500,000 a pop. Lest we be too judgmental Miami, too, has done the same thing in a section called Liberty City, people there actually wanted to make it a crime to be homeless, so they could lock folks up and deal with the disparity of life that way. Thank God for the judge who rules it’s not a crime to engage in life-sustaining acts, like putting up a tent or rigging a cardboard box to sleep in. Right here, in New York City, antique dealers have filed suit, I heard on Upper East Side, to keep a homeless person from sleeping on the heating grates in front of their store at night. They are suing the homeless people themselves for \$1 million dollars.

The Spirit of God is upon me has anointed me to preach the Good News to the poor and to set the captives free to help people recover, Jesus says, and to proclaim a year of God’s favor!

People *liked* that reading from Isaiah. Jesus only read the first two verses, but Isaiah goes on to promise that the ancient ruins will be rebuilt, that what they [???] as their disgrace & shame [will / would] be replaced with shouts of joy. “Everlasting joy will be yours,” verse seven says.

Joy, we talked last week about Jesus first miracle or sign in John’s Gospel, turning water into wine being about restoring the joy of life to us, and about how we are called to do the same. We talked about finding our joy in our sense of connection to one another. The people Ezra read the Law to had lost their joy, maybe forgotten what it feels like to have joy. They’d been drug from their homes, from the land they believed contained their promises, their holiest place had been destroyed, many of them, raised in captivity, no longer knew the mother tongue. That’s why Ezra and the Levites had to interpret everything and give the sense of things, they know longer knew Hebrew or the traditions of their ancestors.

Maybe they cried when they first heard the scriptures that had once constituted the heart and soul of their lives, the way some of us cry the first time we “come home” here, in this place. Or, the first time, after 20 or 30 years of “exile’ we are fed at that table again. Or, maybe it was just because according to Nehemiah’s eighth chapter, Ezra preached for six or seven hours none-stop, sometimes I don’t think you know how lucky you are!!!

Ezra says, “Do not weep – this day, right now, your present moment, is holy to God.” He tells the people to prepare a great feast, with what I don’t know but even to prepare something for others, who like them have nothing, for the joy of God will be your strength, what feeds and sustains you – joy. Luke’s Gospel talks more than any other

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about joy. John the Baptist leaps for joy in his mother's womb, the angels will bring tidings of great joy to the shepherds, and Mary will sing about her spirit rejoicing in the God who saves and much later, in his famous fifteenth chapter, Luke will tell 3 stories about the joy in heaven when even one of us comes home. The people of Ezra's city were home again, but there was very little in their surroundings that would speak to them of joy. There was very little in Nazareth that day. Jesus had done any miracles there, he hadn't healed any sick people there. Today, this scripture, a year of God's favor, everyone knew it meant the Jubilee, a once in a lifetime experience according to the texts of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Everything would be made new: debtors would get out of prison, the impoverished who'd lost their ancestral lands would get them back, the sick would be healed creation would be restored. I'm sure people were thinking: I'm ready do something!

Jesus knows they are ready for change, waiting expectantly. They're got their hopes raised. God has anointed me to preach Good News to the poor --- to set the captives free -- to restore sight to those who do not see -- to announce an entire year of God's favor!! Today this Word is fulfilled in your hearing! We always think it means, they thought it meant fulfilled in him, in Jesus. All the promises of God are fulfilled. He'll heal the sick. He'll share his table with the homeless poor. He'll handle all that forgiveness stuff and making the sun rise on the good and the bad alike, etc., etc., etc.

But that isn't really what he says. "Today," our understanding of scriptures must be wedded to all that we call today," one of my OT professors used to say. Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. Those who hear the word of God do it, Jesus will say in another passage, are restored to their rightful place with God. What if he's talking about the promise our lives hold to fulfill the Word, the Vision, the plan of God that the hungry be fed and the oppressed go free. That is the joy of God. You know what makes God happy.

Doubtless you will say to me, Jesus will continue in this fourth chapter of Luke, "Do here, what we heard you did in Capernaum, but I tell you in truth, there were many widows in Israel during a time of famine, but Elijah was sent (I Kings 17) to a widow at **Zarephath**, in a foreign land, and there were many lepers in Israel, but only Naaman, a gentile, was cured. Luke says people got enraged they tried to push him over the edge of a cliff. Commentators say it's because Jesus was saying the promise no longer to them, to Israel, that they had lost their place in God's healing and saving plan. But not only is that anti-Semitic, it isn't what Luke or Jesus are saying here. Salvation is **[val]** in Luke's Gospel, that's a given, a joy to be shared by the whole people. That's the angelic Mary in chapter two.

We have a lot of trouble with **[val]** salvation. We want people to pay for things, we hope somehow it will be **[???** in our own lives. That's a lot of what's behind many of our addictions. We want someone to make up for all we've suffered or needed and didn't get, but end up hurting ourselves instead. There's a reason Marx said religion is the opiate of the people. We want someone or something else to come and make things right for us. Fundamentalists are addicted to the notion that Jesus will come on the last day

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and duke it out for some of us, punish the wicked, or at the very least, all the people who don't agree with us!

But God's justice is not retributive – it heals and transforms victims and perpetrators alike – otherwise what's the point, if heaven is just like earth?!? Why go? Jurgen Moltmann says the goal of the Reign of God is not reward and punishment, but victory over all that is wrong. The goal is the restoration of all life and that process begins now.

What the world needs is not more division, but people coming together, says Ban Ki-Moon, the new secretary General of the U.N., and coming together NOW. We need to “give ourselves whole heartedly to this life [here and now] and surrender in love” (Moltmann) to both its offerings and its needs. Jesus doesn't want to cut anyone off from the promise. He wanted the promise of his hometown to stand up and claim the promise for themselves by bringing the Word of God to life in their midst. That is God's joy, when we begin to live the Promise. It's what the Prodigal did, he had to start with first making amends, restoring some broken relationships that's something people in recovery sometimes talk about. But ultimately for the Prodigal it was about acting in a way that made the love of God real in his own life.

First making some amends, restoring some broken relationships. That's something people in recovery sometimes talk about. But ultimately for the Prodigal it was about acting in a way that made the love of God real in his own life.

You know, there's a magazine called Venus. It's published by a long-time out and politically active Lesbian named Charlene Coltrane, who apparently having found Jesus, has announced she's “saved” and so is now directing her magazine toward helping Queer people of color “change.” There's a level of joy she says, we will never reach without repenting for the sin of who we are.

“I love you. You are mine.” Those are the only words scripture records Jesus ever hearing God say, we make the other stuff up in here. God is not the author of our confusion, scripture says, we are. What the Prodigal had to repent of was believing he had no place in God's [??]. What he had to do was stop running away from who he was and would heal his relationships. We make the Promise real.

It's the more pressing part of Jesus' reference to Naaman being healed. Yes, he was a [foreigner?] but God's love and care and compass for all people is a given in Luke's Gospel. The real point is that Naaman was willing to do something, surrender something, take direction from someplace outside himself to get well. That too, is something folks in recovery often talk about.

“Recovery is not only about returning to life,” write Francis Nemeck and Marie Coombs, “it's about becoming a life-giving person.” That's the call of this Gospel today. It's what the twelve step is designed to move people toward “the joy of God,” St. Augustine said,

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“is humility full alive,” fully kicked- in [ar?] caring for one another and living in right-relationship.

- It’s what Oprah is doing in starting that school for girls in Africa, being a life-giving person.
- It’s what my friend, Rabbi Michael is doing in standing with security guards in this city, demanding a living wage and things like health care benefits, which very few have.
- There are all kinds of people, from all kinds of walks of life, who are *being* the Promise, fulfilling the Word of God, for this world’s recovery right now. Whoopi Goldberg and Susan Sarandon and Rosie Perez and Amanda Pete taking to the airways to heal and save our lives in the face of a rising crystal meth epidemic with a call to love and respect ourselves and one another.

You know, I read about this church in Lithonia, Georgia. It’s not a church that we, as mostly queer people would have much in common with in fact, their Pastor, Bishop Eddie Long, has led marches against us, marches condemning our people with ugly, ugly epithets. But I read they had as their goal last year, as a community of faith, to do 100,000 acts of kindness – using a condom, is an act of kindness – and respect – and love. If you are a person doing drugs or alcohol, the joy of God is us coming alive to the ways we can not only heal and restore ourselves, but one another. With a little kindness, a little care, our strength, and what will really make all of us whole again – and fulfill God’s word of Promise, NOW. And that, I think is very Good News. And now, because it is Recovery Sunday I want to invite three people to offer three brief tests.