

January 23, 2022 | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [Luke 4:14–21](#)

TITLE: Living in the Power of the Spirit | Part 1

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

I'm going to talk today about a very Presbyterian thing—God's Holy Spirit. Now you may think that Spirit-talk is something better suited to a Pentecostal church or a rousing Baptist revival, but I assure you that the idea of being filled with the Spirit is very Presbyterian. To begin with, what comes to mind when I say the word "spirit"? Since "spirit" itself is hard to picture, we tend to think of it using analogies like air, wind or breath. We fill our lungs with a deep breath and imagine that being the spirit of life moving within us. As part of the devotion at our last Session meeting, elder Katie Haas-Conrad quoted scripture passages on precisely this topic: Genesis 2:7 *Then the Lord God formed the human from the dust of the ground and breathed into the nostrils the breath of life; and the human became a living being.* And Job 33:4 *The spirit of God has made me and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.* The breath of life—that is perhaps how we most commonly think about the connection between us and God's spirit.

But this approach to God's spirit is too passive. Writer Frederick Buechner has complained that our contemporary understanding of spirit is often pale and shapeless, like an unmade bed. If God's spirit truly gives us life then it has a power to it—an intentionality to it. It is not passive, but active. Imagine being in the stadium watching a football game or in an arena watching the Penguins play hockey in a close match. There's a spirit active in the crowd that grabs hold of you, that lifts you up in the thrill of victory or pummels you down in the agony of defeat. Yes, spirit is the breath and source of life—but spirit also gives you a particular type of life—joyous or defeated, exhilarated or exhausted, faithful or faithless.

Spirit activity in general can be good or bad, healing or destructive. There's a big difference between the spirit felt by a crowd as they line the street for a hero's ticker tape parade and the spirit of a crowd swarming down the street hell-bent on rioting, looting or lynching. In our passage from Luke 4, it says quite clearly that Jesus began his public ministry "filled with the power of the Spirit." The Spirit of God was in him, with him, and empowering him. This was something good, faithful, and very active. So the question remains: How do we recognize the power of the Spirit in our own lives? Can we too, as Presbyterians, live by the power of the Spirit?

To begin to answer that question, I'm going to turn to a surprising source—namely scientists who do research on the brain. I'm not an expert on this, but let me try to summarize a few things. The neurons in our brains send information that affects every part of our body; this largely occurs through chemical messengers or neurotransmitters. Two common neurotransmitters are dopamine and serotonin. Dopamine is associated with feelings of rewards and productivity; serotonin is associated with feelings of happiness, focus and peace.

There are things you can do and drugs you can take that stimulate both dopamine and serotonin. But researchers have found that religious practices also stimulate these neurotransmitters. Prayer, meditation and calming rituals can increase the flow of serotonin. They physically activate the parts of the brain, for example, in the temporal lobe, that are important for social relationships and feelings of trust. And these religious practices deactivate other parts of the brain, for example, the parietal lobe, that build up our ego, our sense of “I” and “me.” So a life of faith, worship and prayer, physically, literally reminds your brain that you are part of something bigger than yourself – that you are connected to something that transcends you and you’re connected to all creation.¹ So what does this mean? Well, you can take in the Spirit and simply breathe, existing as a creature on earth. Or you can be filled by the Spirit and move toward self-transcendence, toward the realization that we are connected with God and one another, and that our world has much in it that is good and loving and trustworthy.

This idea of an active Holy Spirit moving in us and through us is at the heart of Jesus’ first sermon there in the synagogue in Nazareth. The passage started by saying Jesus was “filled with the power of the Spirit.” The truth of his being filled with the Spirit was revealed in the passage from Isaiah 61 that Jesus read on that day—a passage that is not ego-centered, but other-centered; a passage not about individuality but about loving and just social relationships. Hear those words again: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, anointing me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*

That is an incredibly Presbyterian message. OK, it’s also an incredibly Episcopalian, Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist and Catholic message, but it really fits with our Reformed theology. It reflects the idea that our lives are a response to God’s providence and grace. And that God promises to give us good news, give us release and new visions, set us free and call us forth into the year of God’s favor. And this is also true for others; that we are sent out into the world to love and serve, to be workers in the field of the Lord’s harvest. This work is not about earning points to be redeemed later in heaven, but to be on earth as it is in heaven. Your brain knows there is value in this, and so does your heart. To be filled with the power of the Spirit is to trust these spiritual connections and, like Christ himself, to take steps forward to make them real here and now.

Church member Mary Alice Lightle recently forwarded to me a copy of one of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s sermons—one on the very familiar topic of “Love your enemies.” You may think that is far too trite a theme for Dr. King but he came back to this topic over and over again, bringing fresh insights from his lived experiences in the Civil Rights movement. In this sermon King began by stressing that to love our enemies, we must first examine ourselves and honestly acknowledge the ways we are a mixture of both good and evil. Then we turn our gaze to those around us and admit that the same is true of them—that within the best of us, there is some evil while within the worst of us, there is also some good.

King went on to say that once we acknowledge this universal condition, we are called as people of faith to reject any opportunity to defeat our enemy, to take joy in their downfall or humiliation. To be filled with the power of the Spirit means we downplay our ego and selfishness; and we move into the place of agape, sacrificial love even for our enemies.

To illustrate this point, King gave a simple yet powerful illustration. He told about a time when he and his brother were driving one evening from Atlanta to Chattanooga. For some reason, the drivers were very discourteous that night, many refusing to dim their lights. King remembered that this agitated his brother who in an angry tone said, “I know what I’m going to do. The next car that comes along and refuses to dim their lights I’m going to fail to dim mine and pour them on in all of their power.” But King replied back, “Oh no, don’t do that. There’d be too much light on this highway and it will end up in mutual destruction. Somebody’s got to have some sense on this highway.”²

Somebody’s got to have some sense on this highway. Ask yourself—where does this sense come from? That doesn’t just come from us; it comes from the One greater than us, the holy One eternal in the heavens yet active in the here and now. It comes from being filled with the power of the Spirit.

Now, to be clear, being filled with the Spirit is not a non-stop dopamine rush. It often puts us at odds with the world. We’ll see this clearly next week when we look at the next verses in Luke 4. It’s like what the theologian Karl Barth has said, *As followers of Christ, we speak when others are silent, and fall silent when words of sin are spoken. We confess when others deny. We stand when others falter. We adore when others blaspheme. We are at peace when others are restless and restless when others are at peace.* Then he went on to say, *to fold one’s hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.*

So to conclude: Long ago Jesus walked into the Nazareth synagogue filled with the power of the Spirit. Today you walked into this church—or quieted yourself at home to watch this service. You too are filled with the Spirit’s power. It gives you life, yet not as simple, passive breath. It opens you up, brain, body and soul to accept your connectedness with all creation. It also challenges you to be one who brings some sense to the highways of life, who proclaims release and justice and mercy that the disorder of the world may finally come to an end. Friends, just as we exist with Christ, may we also say with Christ, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” Breathe in, breathe out, and accept this good news.

AMEN.

¹ Cf. Dr. Melvin Konner, *Believers: Faith in Human Nature*, 2019, pp. 59, 95.

² Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “*Loving Your Enemies*,” sermon delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, November 17, 1957.