

January 30, 2022 | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [Luke 4:21–30](#)

TITLE: **Living the Power of the Spirit – Part 2**

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

The story of Jesus' life and ministry really takes off here in Luke 4. Prior to this we read about his birth and baptism, as well as how he spent 40 days in the wilderness and was tempted by the devil. Emerging victorious from that, Jesus headed to his home town of Nazareth. Scripture says he was "filled with the power of the Holy Spirit." This seems to have guided and energized Jesus. He went to the synagogue and said boldly, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me" and then proceeded to lay out an agenda for compassionate social justice—*To bring good news to the poor, release to captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and celebrate the year of God's favor.*

There is clearly an active Spirit at work in Jesus. It is like the Spirit that came upon the disciples on Pentecost—sending them out into the streets to tell the good news of the resurrection of Christ. And it is the Spirit that ideally moves through every church and every church member—comforting us when we grieve; strengthening us when we are bone-weary; inspiring us when we step outside these walls as ambassadors of hope for a despairing world. We want to live by the power of this Spirit. So how does this happen? The story in Luke 4 provides an answer, but maybe not in the way we expected.

After Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah, there is no denying that things quickly took a bad turn. One moment they are amazed at the wisdom shown by Joseph's son; the next moment they are filled with rage and want to throw Jesus off a cliff. As we consider this story, I want you to hold onto a piece of wisdom offered by the African American theologian Howard Thurman. He said this: *The contradictions of life are not final.* I want you to remember that statement, so repeat after me: "The contradictions of life are not final."

All of our lives are marked by contradictions. We are social creatures yet because of the pandemic we are isolating ourselves behind masks and walls. We are blessed to live in a wonderful nation, yet we are often unhappy, anxious, self-medicating through alcohol, drugs, and electronics. Life is marked by contradictions—yet by faith we proclaim these contradictions are not final or ultimate.

Contradictions marked the beginning of Jesus' ministry. There he was in the synagogue, heralded for doing miracles and great deeds in other cities and then derided for not doing the same thing in his home town. He was seen as a wise man of faith and then renounced for daring to tell stories from their own faith tradition about Elijah and Elisha. He was initially welcomed and then is threatened with death. Contradictions in life are very real, but they are not final. The proof of this is that Jesus was not thrown off the cliff. Instead he walked back through the angry mob and went on his way.

Let's look a bit more closely at what Jesus said and then see how the power of the Spirit not only shaped his words but shaped the ending of this story. Before Jesus began preaching that day, his reputation preceded him. He had done wonders in other cities. So when this hometown celebrity appeared in Nazareth, the expectation was that he would do more of the same right there. Wasn't he one of them—a favored son, a member of their ethnic, religious, regional “team”? But that wasn't a priority for Jesus. He said “no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown” and then reminded them that God's grace has never been restricted to the in-crowd. Jesus reminded these insiders that God's love is also for the outsiders, Gentiles, non-Jews. That wasn't what they wanted to hear.

In the time of Jesus, the apostle Paul and the early church, the biggest challenge was convincing Jewish communities that the God of the covenant was also the God of the Gentiles, of non-Jews who weren't children of Abraham. Now we shouldn't look down on our predecessors; the Christian church has exerted a lot of energy excluding people over the years. It has divided the world into believers and non-believers; it has divided congregations between Catholic and Protestant, mainline and evangelical. It has a history of saying “men only” for church leaders; of segregating whites from people of color; of barring anyone not perceived to be heterosexual; and of finding ways to make economic status a ticket for admission even as we preach of a Savior who was sent specifically to the poor and those on the margins. These are the contradictions of our faith—even at times right here. But these contradictions are not final. The Spirit has the final word on this. And to illustrate this point, let's shift to one of my favorite subjects: music.

A classic Christian text is the *Confessions* of St. Augustine. In book XI, Augustine asks a simple, yet profound question: How does music work? When we listen to music, a single note has very little value. Rather, the meaning of the note comes from what goes before it and what comes after it. Let me demonstrate: If I sing one note (“O”) it has very little musical value. If I repeat it and make a word of it (“Ho-ly”) that has a bit more value but still doesn't communicate much. But through a combination of memory and anticipation—of notes you remember and notes you expect to hear, out of that comes music (like this—“Ho-ly, Ho-ly”). The mind takes what it remembers, what it hears, and what it anticipates to create something special—a melody, a hymn.¹

Now you can't make music from one note. You can't make a book from one word. And you can't become fully a child of God all by yourself. Think of yourself as a single note (“me”). You may be a lovely note, but alone you can't make much music. You need other notes, other people, to compose a melody of life. Now instead of music, think of knowledge. You may be quite smart; you may know a lot. But human knowledge is never contained in just one person. It is contained in lots and lots of people. It involves memory—things learned—and anticipation—thing yet to be discovered. You can only create a song by interacting with lots of other notes. You can only gain knowledge by tapping into the rich library of wisdom in the world and in other people. In the same way, you can only be a person of faith when you become part of a larger melody, a deeper

wisdom, and see God in all the relationships that make up this life. That perspective is a Spirit-filled perspective.

On that day in the synagogue, Jesus looked his friends and neighbors in the eyes and basically told them that. He entered Nazareth literally filled with the power of the Spirit. He told them, *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. God wants to bring you good news, release, sight, freedom.* Then he went on to say that this message is not just for you; it is for those around you, especially those you might think God isn't noticing. God sees all life, just as God saw the widow at Zarephath, starving and forgotten until Elijah knocked on her door—or when God saw the Syrian general Naaman, stricken with leprosy until healed by the prophet Elisha. Jesus knew that the people may not like this message, but in this melody, in this gospel, there is life—there is hope—there is the power of the Holy Spirit filling us with the certainty that the contradictions of life are not final.

When Jesus spoke these things, the crowd grew furious. They considered his words blasphemy. They wanted a private God, not a global God, and they'd kill anyone who'd suggested such a thing. They herded Jesus out of town. They planned to throw him off a cliff and stone him. But instead scripture says Jesus turned and passed through them and went on his way. The angry shouts were met with a quiet yet firm presence. The violence was countered with resolute non-violence. The tribal faith was defeated as the Savior of the world “went on his way” among Jews and Gentiles, women and men, lepers and Pharisees alike.

A few years later, another mob would shout at Jesus, call him a blasphemer and demand he be put to death. They will push him once more to a different hill—a hill called Golgotha. In place of stones, they'd use a cross. And as the sun set that day, they'd think their one little note and narrow little faith had won. But on Easter, Jesus would once more move about in the midst of them. Once more his song would be sung. The contradiction of the cross would be proven not to be final—a deeper truth would be seen in the risen Christ.

There's symmetry between the beginning and the end of Christ's ministry. Filled with the power of the spirit, Jesus preached in the synagogue an expansive gospel—and by that same spirit, he overcame the crowd's angry contradictions by walking unharmed through the middle of them. This same Spirit is given to us. It fills you and me – it connects us to one another—it offers life, not death; peace, not anger; hope, not fear. Breathe in, breathe out—and now you too go on your way filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

¹ Cf. Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time*, 2017, pp. 181-82.