

**THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY, JANUARY 21<sup>st</sup> 2007**  
**St. John's Lutheran Church, Atlanta, Georgia**  
**"Returning in the Power of the Spirit "/Luke 4: 14-21**

Grace be to you and peace from God our Creator, Redeemer, and Life-giving Spirit. Amen.

Then Jesus *filled* with the power of the Spirit returned to Galilee... "Today this scripture has been *fulfilled* in your hearing." This is a day of filling and fulfillment, sisters and brothers. Like Jesus, we are filled with the power of the Spirit. We are filled with joy at what the Spirit has been doing in caring for this congregation, its pastor and his family during this time of trial. We are filled with longing for the Spirit to continue reforming our church, changing it in bold and creative ways so that it accepts not only the promise and presence of its gay and lesbian pastors, but our partners and families too. And we are filled with hope for the outcome of this trial, for in Christ we have the assurance that regardless of the outcome, victory is ours, like we sang Thursday evening.

Yes, we are filled this morning with power of the Spirit. That's what brought most of us here today and it's what brings people here to St. John's week-after-week and Sunday-after-Sunday. Because people know that this place is a *filling* station; this is a place where God's children of all ages come to be filled with Word and Sacrament, with singing and solace, with community and courage so they can continue living as God's people in the world.

But don't take my word for it; I'm only attending my third worship service here at St. John's. Rather, take it from one who knows, Paul Arne. I read Paul's letter to Bishop Warren on Friday morning as I prayed for Brad, Darin, St. John's, and all the trial participants. On the last page of his letter, Paul said, "At the end of the day this isn't about Pastor Brad. It isn't about homosexuality and the church. It's about the work of the Holy Spirit in our congregation."

It's about the work of the Holy Spirit, said Paul Arne, not to be confused with St. Paul though I'm sure some are probably viewing you that way, Paul. And it is the same Spirit who filled and anointed Jesus that has called and gathered us here this morning to hear God's word and be strengthened for God's mission.

Jesus had just finished reading the scroll from the prophet Isaiah. He had read powerful words in a powerful way. Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down as any rabbi would do. Everyone was looking at him intently, or as our text says, "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." Today, said Jesus, today...

Last week many folks around the country and perhaps around the world celebrated the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In his name people did community service and many

sermons were preached about his dream. But for so many in this land and every land, Dr. King’s dream and God’s dream are what the poet Langston Hughes called “A Dream Deferred.”

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore--  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over--  
like a syrupy sweet?  
  
Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.  
  
Or does it explode?

Last week all across the United States people were joining hands and singing “We Shall Overcome”. “We shall overcome, we shall overcome, we shall overcome someday. Oh, deep in my heart I do believe we shall overcome someday.” Well we can sing about *someday* for a long, long time, while things keep getting worse for people who are oppressed and for this planet we call earth.

*Someday* the violence in our country will end and young Black men won’t have to fear DWB, driving while Black. They won’t have to be afraid that they might end up like Sean Bell, the 23 year old unarmed African-American groom who was killed by the New York City police on his wedding day after his car was riddled with 50 bullets.

*Someday* war will end and we won’t have pray daily for the people of Iraq and Afghanistan, Palestine and Israel, Darfur and Somalia. *Someday* the oppressed will be set free. *Someday* hunger around the globe will be eradicated. *Someday* all people will have heard the gospel. God will take care of all that *someday* -- so we don't have to do anything **today** to be healers of this weary and broken world. Well friends, I’ve got a news flash for us: for Jesus and the people who follow his way of compassionate justice, the *someday* of deferred dreams is the *today* of God’s promise. “Today”, said Jesus, “this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing!”

This was no easy statement for Jesus to make, for in effect he was saying that God’s mission which the prophet Isaiah had spoken of hundreds of years earlier was being fulfilled in him, in his words and his work. Jesus was announcing his ministry as the fulfillment of God's

salvation-time.

The good news which Jesus lived, preached and taught was not some pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by reward for suffering in this life. No, it was a radical reversal of the world-as-it-is so that we could live into the world-as-it-ought-to-be. It was God’s coming in the flesh to be what our Jewish kinfolk call *tikkun olam*, repairers of the breach, healers of the world. That’s what this first sermon of Jesus was all about; it was about how he, and eventually those who would follow him would be repairers of this war-weary, wounded world. “*Today* this scripture has been fulfilled in our hearing.”

Now we know that poverty, injustice, imprisonment, and all manner of blindness still abound. But if we believe Jesus and receive his good news, then we also trust that the vision he proclaimed has commenced. John Stendahl said it so well: “This proposed future is at hand. The present leans into it and it has begun. Such proclamation is not an abstracted statement of fact, but a reality declared to reshape reality now.” Today, sisters and brothers, today, God’s reign of justice has begun!

And just as Jesus preached that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him, so I say to you this morning that the Spirit of the Lord is upon *you*. In your baptism into Christ, God anointed *you* to bring good news to the poor. For centuries the church has tried to spiritualize what Luke’s Jesus meant by the term “the poor” so we Christians of means could relieve our guilty consciences over the scandal of poverty in our world. When Jesus said *poor* he definitely meant folks who were economically destitute and devoid of life’s basic necessities.

But biblical scholars and theologians don’t think Jesus’ use of the word poor was limited solely to those who barely subsisted. Rather the term poor also meant those who are for any number of socio-religious reasons were relegated to positions outside the boundaries of God’s people.

By preaching good news to these people, Jesus refused to recognize the socially and religiously determined boundaries of his day. He made the “outsiders” “insiders” and as much recipients of God’s grace as anyone already in the tribe. Others may have regarded such people as beyond the pale of salvation, but Jesus made it clear that God opened a way for them to belong to God’s family too.

And that brings us to this morning, sisters and brothers. If Jesus was so clear that the poor of his day: hungry, homeless, sinful and sick folks were to be included within God’s kingdom, then what’s wrong with the church? Why is it that congregations like St. John’s, who have a partnered gay pastor, can understand that if the Spirit says, “This one named Bradley is my servant”, that the church shouldn’t say no to the Spirit? How is it that the ELCA can spend

more than \$100,000 on this ecclesiastical trial when that money could be better used helping the already forgotten survivors of Hurricane Katrina rebuild their lives?

The Spirit of the Lord is upon you today, my friends, as it has been throughout this entire ordeal. And you can be absolutely confident that the Spirit will continue to guide and keep you in the days beyond this time of testing. Filled with the power of the Spirit God expects St. John’s and the saints gathered here this morning to keep on keeping on in the ways of Jesus’ gentle rule of justice.

But it’s not enough for you to simply keep on keeping on. God wants you to do so with joy. God wants you to leave this place with your spirits strengthened and your bodies blessed. God wants you and all people to be nourished and nurtured by the Word so that you can take the Spirit with you into all the places God will send you. So hear again these words of Nehemiah, Erza, and the priests spoken to their people thousands of years ago that they may be a benediction for your souls: “This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep. Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” And the people said, “Amen and Amen.”