

“The Spirit on Me”

“The spirit of the LORD GOD is upon me,” intones the prophet Isaiah, ***“because the LORD has anointed me . . .”*** This is a message that every one of the Old Testament prophets could have proclaimed. Each had a calling — an anointing — from God to proclaim the prophetic message. Each was endowed by the Spirit of God to announce that message, and to do so in the face of anger, opposition, hostility, even death.

Jesus Himself would claim that heritage. On that day when He got up to read at the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4), He turned to this Isaiah text. And, having read these verses, closed the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, He announced: ***“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”*** (4:21) He, too, faced hostility, anger, opposition, and yes, even death — and not just at Golgotha . . . that very day, almost as soon as those words were out of His mouth, Luke tells us: ***“. . . all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.”*** (4:29-30)

Apparently, having the Spirit upon you does not necessarily lead to a life of tranquility. We should not expect that it would.

All too often, we try to tame the Spirit — a gentle wind that slips quietly into the room . . . a slight flutter of the curtains, a faint whisper across our faces . . . ah, yes, Spirit, come. But the Scriptures paint a somewhat different picture. At Pentecost the Spirit almost kicks the door in . . . sweeps into the room with fire and wind, and a noise so loud an entire city is drawn to see what awesome thing has happened. At creation, the Spirit swept over the waters of chaos, wrestling and subduing them into order and purpose. This Spirit is not just shimmering breezes and faint voices. Bernard Groeschel calls the Holy Spirit ***“God in his outrageous mode.”***

This Spirit is power . . . this Spirit is raw energy . . . this is the wind of

God, the breath that creates, restores, enlivens, renews. This Spirit is on you . . . and on me. The Spirit of the Lord is upon us ... bBecause the Lord has anointed us.

Anointing is simply the public declaration of the office to which someone has been chosen or has ascended. In ancient times, anointing was commonly done with oil of some sort. In our case, the choice of anointing medium was water — for in baptism we have been chosen to live as children of God and inheritors of eternal life. The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because God has anointed us. Anointing most often involved a roll to be played, a job to complete, an office to assume. Kings were anointed, as were prophets. Emissaries sent forth on special missions may be anointed for that very task. As are we.

“ . . . he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners . . . ” Isaiah affirms. This is a threefold mission, one we share with Isaiah and our Lord: 1) ***“to bring good news to the oppressed,”*** 2) ***“to bind up the brokenhearted,”*** and 3) ***“to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners . . . ”*** Three tasks . . . and they all involve bringing a message.

We are to ***“bring good news to the oppressed..”*** Most translations here would read ***“bring good news to the poor.”*** The NRSV has pretty good theology on its side, but it also has an insight into the Hebrew. The Hebrew word עָנִי *ani* is a quite specific term for “poor.” Other words that mean “poor” connote meanings like, “weak,” “humble,” “in need.” But this word — one used often by the prophets — means those who, because of their low position in society, are mistreated, disregarded, abused, and neglected.

So, what would be “good news to the poor”? Many in our culture would reply, ***“Money!”*** It may be the answer that even the poor would want us to bring. Money is something we, as a culture, think will solve many, many problems. It certainly is our most prevalent political response to situations. And yet, it may be that what people really need — including

the poor and the oppressed — money cannot provide.

The psychologist, Abraham Maslow, developed a personality theory based upon what he called the “hierarchy of needs.” These begin with Physiological Needs — things like oxygen, food, water, and shelter. They are followed by Safety Needs; we long for security. Needs of Love, Affection and Belonging; Needs for Esteem, both from ourselves and others; Needs for Self-Actualization, to do, quoting Maslow, “*what we were born to do.*”

This theory is by no means settled canon in the psychological or sociological community, but it does make some sense. When you are really hungry, it’s hard to think of much else. If you are not feeling safe in an environment, it’s hard to get on with whatever task is at hand. Etc.

The oppressed poor, the *ani*, have none of these needs being met. So good news begins for them with food, shelter, clothing — things we do through the Community Pantry and Redeemer Crisis Center (and by extension through LMM). Good news is being able to live in a place where guns and drugs do not dominate. Good news is knowing that someone cares for you enough to actually be with you in such places of struggle.

We are “*to bind up the brokenhearted...*” the *nishbar leb* נִשְׁבֵּר לֵב “*the broken of heart.*” Who are “*the broken of heart*”? (here is the only time this phrase is used in the Old Testament.) Surely, they are those who mourn the loss of loved ones but it may also be . . .

A young woman whose “soulmate” (or so she thought) has abandoned her for another; the ten-year-old who didn’t get to play in the big game — or worse, got to play and struck out three times and committed four errors; the young man I read about who was on the “Magna Cum Laude” list for graduation, until a classmate took the final at the last minute, scored one point higher than he, and (because this was graded on a curve) missed out on that 3.6 GPA by one one-hundredth of a point; even the guy whose brand-new, just-drove-it-off-the-lot-this -morning car has

caught its first “ding” in the Giant Eagle parking lot from a runaway grocery cart.

There is no end of people all around us that are brokenhearted. But broken hearts are not always easy to see. Many people keep those feelings bottled up inside, and even if asked, will not reveal what is going on. I listened to an NPR report as the author of a book entitled, “Boys of Few Words” talked about how we parents often stifle the communication we seek by the questions we ask. “*What are you feeling?*” is a question (especially to boys . . . and men) that causes “shut down.” You may get an answer, but it will likely be something along the lines of “*Fine.*” or “*kay.*” or more honestly, “*I don’t know.*” Even something as seemingly innocuous as “*What did you do today?*” does not solicit much of a response. Maybe you’ll get back, “*Stuff.*” This is by no means confined to males, although many women do seem more inclined to give expression of feelings to peers.

How do you bind up the brokenhearted when you can’t reach in to mend that heart? It’s called “a ministry of presence” — you “be with” that person. People often tell me that they just don’t know what to say at a funeral home. Maybe you don’t need to say anything more than, “*I’m so sorry for you.*” and just “be with” that bereaved person. I recognize that, right now, in our pandemic environment, being present while keeping distant makes this so hard, and telephone calls or Zoom contacts don’t quite cut it.

We are “***to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners . . .***” This is one that takes most of us well out of our comfort zones. First, the idea of “prisoners” can be scary. As a teen, I accompanied my Pastor to many venues where he did service as a chaplain, including on more than one occasion Walpole State Prison. I will never forget my first visit (I believe I was in sixth grade), as we passed through the cellblock to get to the chapel — I just knew that I was being looked at like I was a piece of fresh meat. I was very glad there were bars and locks on those doors.

In Jesus’ world, prisons were not just places where criminals were

incarcerated. The poor often were confined to prison for debts that could not repay (an idea that never has made sense to me). The mentally disturbed often wound up there, as well. And, of course, with such benevolent rulers as Herod around, there were always batches upon batches of political prisoners to be found.

Some things just do not change . . . I have been in on many discussions with the staff at LMM's Adult Guardianship Services when they have been named as guardian for some ward (usually a male) in his early thirties whose behaviors, if he fails to comply with his medications, are dangerous, even life-threatening. Often, the only choice left to the guardian is to have that person arrested and imprisoned, because they are too big a threat to themselves and/or others to be in the community and there is nowhere else for them to be.

But Isaiah proclaims that we are ***“to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners . . .”*** How do we do that? We can't drive down to the Lucasville Correctional Facility and walk up to the front gate with a bullhorn and shout, *“Let these people go!”* Were we to try, I suspect we might become part of “these people” in short order. But there is freedom even in incarceration. Author Tony Campolo tells that story of a well-to-do woman who volunteered to sing as part of her church's prison ministry. On her way to the prison, a truck spit up a pebble that dinged her windshield. This greatly distressed her and, as she reported to the prisoners, she pulled over, stopped her car and prayed. She told the assembled felons, *“Would you believe that in that moment the damage to my windshield simply disappeared!”* To which one of the prisoners in the back of the room yelled out, *“Crap!”*

Many prisoners do “find religion” in prison, but not because of fantastic stories. We can build on that . . . “Friend to Friend” is a ministry at LMM that matches volunteers with those incarcerated in the Cuyahoga County Jail. While visitation is restricted to that facility (once again, even more so during the pandemic), letter-writing becomes a valued means for outreach (I guess in this case, it's inreach). But, the real blessings come

when that person is released from jail, and needs support as he seeks to re-enter the community. For this, face-to-face contact, coupled with the support ministries of LMM, give the now formerly incarcerated a real shot at new lives (the man who founded this program, Steve Messner, just died about two weeks ago). But there are other imprisonments and captivities we must address: Self-centeredness, overindulgence, ignorance

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us. It is the gift of our baptisms. It is a gift we have hardly put into serious use. Maybe it is time that we do that. In your family . . . in your neighborhood . . . in your circle of friends, acquaintances, co-workers there are the poor, the brokenhearted, the captives. It is our calling to identify them. It is our ministry to pray for them. We must also do what you were reborn to do . . . to ***“bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners . . .”*** in other words: to be Christ to them.

Amen.