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Third Sunday after Epiphany

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After his baptism at the River Jordan, even though the power of the Holy Spirit was with him, Jesus was led into the desert by the devil. For forty days long days he was tested. He was tempted to turn his back on God's word. Encouraged to go his own way. Bullied to find an easy way out, but Jesus didn't break.

Luke tells us that Jesus came back to Galilee still filled with the power of the Spirit and people everywhere were talking about him. He taught in the synagogues and everyone admired him. So clever. So smart. So inspired. And since he was working throughout the territory of Galilee, it only made sense that he would end up in his home town of Nazareth. The place where Mary and Joseph had worked and lived and brought up their kids.

It was the Sabbath and so Jesus did what he always did – he went to the Synagogue for worship. And when the time came to read the scripture, he stood up and was given the book of Isaiah to read. He was the local boy made good. He was their home-grown celebrity and so he was the guy who got to read that day. It was an honor and a privilege.

“The Lord's Spirit has come to me, because he has chosen me to tell the good news to the poor. The Lord has sent me to announce freedom for prisoners, to give sight to the blind, to free everyone who suffers, and to say, ‘This is the year the Lord has chosen.’”

Luke says that when Jesus sat down, everyone stared straight at him as he told them that Isaiah's prophetic words had come to pass right in front of their eyes. It's as if Jesus said, “Do you want to know who I am and why I'm here? Well here you go!” No euphemisms. No parables. No metaphors. No hidden meaning or complicated symbolism. This is it! This is me!

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During the process of being called to serve as your pastor, I was asked what I would preach if it was my very last sermon. It was a good question, and one we might all think about. What if you had one last chance to tell people about God? What would you say? If the preacher was Luke the physician, odds are good, he would tell you this story, because these verses are essentially Jesus' life, ministry and purpose in a nutshell. This is what he believed Jesus was all about. Luke is setting us up for the rest of the story, but since it's Epiphany, the time when we focus on how God reveals God's self through the person of Jesus Christ, what, exactly, has been revealed in this particular chunk of the gospel?

It helps if you can read Greek or if you have some clever books and resources because the first thing that Luke tells us is that Jesus was enthusiastic. When it says in English that Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit- in Greek it says that Jesus was *en theous*. Which means he was “in God” He was inspired. He was enthusiastic. We've let that word *enthusiastic* come to mean so little, when really it means so much. Jesus was enthused to be a prophet and prophets tell the truth about the present and give hope to people who want to know what God is going to do next. Jesus' sermon in Nazareth is a prophetic message. This, he says, is what I will do next. He tells the truth about the realities of our world, where the lowly are looked down upon, where the poor sleep in cardboard boxes, and where innocent captives remain in their prisons.

As we move through the gospel of Luke, we will hear again and again how Jesus is on the side of those who have the least. He cares for those that the world has turned away again and again.

The sick. The dying. The diseased. The broken.

Women. Children. Outsiders. Foreigners.

The Samaritan. The Prodigal Son. Poor Lazarus dying outside the rich man's gate. The Ethiopian Eunuch asking to be baptized.

And it's just as the Angels proclaimed at his birth, Jesus was born to us - "a Savior who is Christ the Lord." Or as Luke writes in chapter 19 "The Son of man came to seek and to save what was lost."

Again, and again we will hear of how God is at work through Jesus and through the work of the Holy Spirit. Enthusiastic people will boldly proclaim that Jesus is the one we should follow. And they will be motivated by that same indwelling spirit to do service for the gospel.

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Well what else do we know? I read something this week that I must have read before, but since I don't remember it, maybe not. In a commentary on this text, Karoline Lewis points out that it all takes place in real time. In other words, it doesn't take any longer for us to tell this story than it took for it to actually happen, which may not seem like a very big deal, except that it takes no more than a few moments for Jesus to reveal the very essence of who he is and what he has come to do. It takes Luke no more than eight sentences to explain what he believes to be the heart of the gospel. And yet, we hem and we haw and think we don't have the words to tell someone else about the incredible good news of Jesus Christ.

Lewis points out that Jesus words could have easily, practically and succinctly been articulated in a summary statement. But Luke knows that a synopsis of the meaning of Jesus is not sufficient. When we are talking about God, an abridged or condensed witness will not work. And so we get the whole purpose of the Luke-Acts narrative in one story. The narrative "intentionally and continually invades, initiates, and even invites any and all theological deliberation, exploration, and imagination. Such theological thinking takes time and cannot be straightforwardly encapsulated in convenient statements of theoretical intent. Rather, Jesus' words are a call to real life, real people, in real time."

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If that's not enough revelation for one day – here's one more interesting thing about today's texts. The language of Jesus' first sermon probably sounds familiar. Its tone and topic and concern are the same as we heard back in Advent in the words of Mary who is the first one to give witness and articulate what Jesus' ministry is all about. Her Magnificat is a foreshadowing of the ministry of her very own son.

Mary's song acknowledges that what **God** has done, her son will do as well. She connects the dots between the God that she knows, and has always known, and the God that is shaping her future through the birth of her son Jesus. She proclaims that God's love will be the same passion that the world will experience because of Jesus.

So what if Jesus learned something from his mother in his early years. What if, like many of us, Jesus asked his mother to tell him stories. Stories about his birth and the events that surrounded it. Stories about their ancestors and their family.

What if, the boy Jesus first learned about what it means to bring good news to the poor from the stories that his mother told him when he was growing up? Stories about Elizabeth, the mother of his cousin John? About Sarah, his ancestor, who experienced the same shame Mary had known?

What if he watched his mother and listened to her and saw her as someone who not only knew the good news proclaimed to her but also lived it out in her daily life?

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In an effort to be as succinct as Luke – here’s what I hope you will take home on this third Sunday after the Epiphany.

- 1) Jesus came to rescue those most in need of help.
- 2) the reason we know something about Jesus’ character and his concerns are because we heard the stories from someone else. Our mom or dad or a friend or a Sunday school teacher or a preacher or pastor. Nobody ever comes to faith all on their own. Even if you read about Jesus in a book, somebody had to write that book.
- 3) We are called to enthusiastically share this good news. And it doesn’t have to be fancy or flowery or said “just so.” We simply need to get the story out there, so that, like you and me, others will know that God is with us. Now and always.

There is someone in your life right now who needs to hear that God is with them and that God cares about their concerns. Don’t worry if you have the right words. Just tell the story and tell it with enthusiasm.