

Spirit-filled – Anything is Possible

A Message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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That Spirit. Did you know that “the Spirit” has a leading role in the Gospel according to Luke? In chapter 3, Luke tells us that John is in the wilderness critiquing Roman tax-collectors, military personnel, and Herod. His critique gets him prosecuted. In the next chapter, the Spirit fills John, then it overshadows Mary (Luke 1:35), then it descends on Jesus as he is baptized (Luke 3:22). Now, that Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness. He will leave eventually, leave the wilderness to return to Galilee in the power (Greek word “dunamis”) of the Spirit (Luke 4:14).¹

What does “Spirit” mean for you?

For me Spirit means does not mean passive or static, instead it seems to be always active, guiding, teaching. Sometimes Spirit seems to challenge me, but I sense that it is always our companion.

I often say a simple prayer, like, “Spirit, ruffle my feathers.” Sometimes, when we as church get a bit too comfortable, too rehearsed, too controlled, perhaps we could pray for Spirit to, “Blow us. Ruffle our collective feathers, just a little bit.”

Jesus gets blown by that Spirit out into the wilderness. If we were coming to this story for the very first time, hearing the word “wilderness” might conjure images of hyenas, barren, places with names like “death valley.” Actually, the Greek word here for wilderness means:

an uncultivated, unpopulated place; a deserted area; a solitary place that provides needed quiet (freedom from disturbance).²

The Spirit knows what it is doing as Jesus begins ministry. There is clarifying process going on here; facing the voice of temptation, Jesus is utterly human, pushed to understand his religious tradition and how he will live it. Daunting, yet Jesus is equal to the challenge presented to him.

What of this idea of being tempted? In the version of the prayer Jesus taught that we usually use, we regularly say, “Lead us not into temptation.” Next week we will say a version of this Prayer of Jesus that instead uses the words, “...save us from the time of trial.” What do you think, “temptation” or “time of trial”?

Temptation to sin, by that I envision falling prey to the voice of our culture to not to be the creation that God made us to be. The subversive messages of our culture, seeking our attention: *You deserve to be treated like royalty*; or, perhaps the temptation is expressed in a slightly different way: *Dave, you can be successful, powerful, beautiful, or desirable if you just buy this product or adopt this set of values.*

¹ Commentary for March 6, 2022. Jeremy L. Williams. WorkingPreacher.org

² Strong's Concordance. 2048, translations of the Greek word *érēmos* in verse

The devil's voice of this Gospel story is subtly (or not so subtly) whispering in our ears, coaxing us to individualistic values, displaying before us grand visions that will entice us to leave the path that our Creator has placed before you & me.

I find this task a difficult one, discerning the path, the journey we must make to follow Jesus. Here are a couple of things that I believe fervently:

- First, that this path in our modern reality is a tough one, perhaps at times so difficult that we might be tempted to say that it is impossible to stay on the path;
- The other thing that I believe is that God's Spirit DOES guide us, challenge us, encourage us, poke us. Spirit sometimes prods me, taking you and I to places that are not comfortable in order for us to clarify what we believe.

In my life, with all its distractions, its tragedy and beauty, my most frightening yet greatest opportunity to clarify values, was when I got away from the fray of life. Being alone, travelling, listening for my inner voices that get ignored when I'm distracted by the voices everywhere. That was a profound privilege and gift, being in a wilderness.

When life presses in, does the Spirit not invite us, you and me, into some sort of wilderness? Is it a quiet place in your house, or, perhaps a moment in your day where there is tranquility? I suggest that we are regularly invited into Spirit-led liminal moments – edges in our day, between mundane living yet perhaps on the edge of something holy at the same time.

Perhaps we might see those wilderness moments as gifts, not as something to be feared. Perhaps along that wilderness journey are gifts offered us, like this week's first sign and symbol – the rock, a reminder that solitude can be good. Yes, solitude means that in that moment we are alone. We must listen to our voices, some that annoy us, or scare us, but the softer, beautiful voice we hear amidst the din is the voice that our Creator gave to each of us. What a gift, to hear that voice.

My way of seeking wilderness is the night, or early morning. Holy, quiet, meditative times, even if I'm not exactly praying. I welcome the tranquility.

How do you find wilderness solitude? Perhaps during this worship or in this coming week you will reflect on where you find solitude – perhaps a word or an image that captures that experience. I'd really appreciate it if you could share it with us, in your comments on YouTube or on Facebook, or put it on one of the sunburst shapes that will go up on our Solitude signpost with the rock.

Facing our seemingly most impossible challenges in life: financial burdens, a gut-wrenching relationship, a health problem that makes the future seem so uncertain. Can we see the Spirit's invitation to accept its gift? Space to clarify what you believe, to distinguish between the voice of fear and the voice of the One who tells us over and over: *Lo I will be with you always. Nothing can separate us from the Love of God.*

That voice of the angel Gabriel telling Mary: *Nothing is impossible with God.* Amen.