



“Incarnate”

The Rev. Michael Denton
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Scripture (NRSV):

Luke 4:14-22

14 Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. 15 He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. 16 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

18 “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,

19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

20 And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” 22 All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?”

I Corinthians 12:12-31

¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

¹⁴ Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” ²² On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴ whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵ that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸ And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

Sermon:

The two lectionary texts for today are two of the best known in the bible. I’m going to dive in to each text a bit today because, within these scriptures of the ancient church there are some very important things for the modern church to consider.

Today’s text from Luke starts off with the words, “Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit...” Just a little while later in the text, it says “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...” In the Greek, the word used for Spirit is pneúma which means Spirit or wind or breath. In Hebrew, the same word was ruach and it, too, means Spirit, wind or breath. When it was used in a context relating to God, pneúma was understood to mean the breath of God or the wind of God. For me, this changes how I understand these texts were read by those who heard them first. It would sound something like this, “Jesus, filled with the breath of God...”

or “The wind of God is blowing on me...” These were people who observed that before you spoke, you inhaled so when you were filled with the breath of God you exhaled the Word of God. These were people who understood the power of the wind to move a sail or create a dust storm so when they heard that the breath of God was upon Jesus they were hearing someone whose direction was being determined by this holy wind. When they spoke of the Spirit, they were not talking about merely an encouraging, benevolent presence, they were talking about a force that was intimately connected to God and to those whom God gave breath to.

This may seem like a helpful piece of trivia, at first, until you begin to dive in to how deeply rooted the theme of Spirit is to the writer of Luke and Acts. Scholars have figured out that Luke and Acts were written by the same person and this theme of the Spirit is central to both books. Once you start to see it, it's impossible to ignore. I won't mention all the places the Spirit is mentioned in this way, but I will mention a few. The Spirit is first mentioned in Luke as part of the pregnancy narrative of Mary where the moving presence of the Spirit is part of Jesus' conception. A few verses later, Mary goes to visit Elizabeth and the Holy Spirit fills Elizabeth and she exhales with a loud cry: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” A few verses later, a very similar thing happens when Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit and exhales prophecy about John the Baptist. Later, after some similar interventions by the breath of God, the wind of God is present through a *creature* of the wind - a dove - at Jesus' baptism. This continues in many different ways throughout the Gospels and then, as Luke begins to transition towards Acts, something important happens. As Jesus is on the cross, the writer of Luke/Acts has Jesus saying this, “(Luke 23:46) Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Having said this, he breathed his last.”

This is the last moment that the Spirit is mentioned in Luke. We don't hear about it again, until Acts. Acts begins with this:

“Act 1:1 – Act 1:5: In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

Do you catch the transition? By adding this idea of breath and wind, that breath that Jesus exhaled is now moving the disciples. The writer of Luke/Acts is foreshadowing how the Disciples are about to be filled with the same holy authority, life and breath that Jesus was.

Not long after this, we join the gathered, frightened disciples trying to figure out what to do next, as they stay hidden in a room when - Whoosh! - in comes the Spirit as a wind of fire - Whoosh! - the Spirit enters into those gathered in that room and not only do they exhale the Word of God but they do it in the language of each of those who were present to hear them. We describe this moment as Pentecost - the birthday of the church. In the writer's, of Luke/Acts, understanding this was the moment that the power, authority and wisdom of God through Christ became the responsibility and authority of these followers of Jesus, collectively. This was the moment when the liberating, healing, truth-telling calling of Jesus became the calling of what we would later call the Church.

The Apostle Paul continues this same basic theme in the letters he writes. That is clearly true with the text we read today, from Corinthians; a community he likely helped found. These were sermons meant to challenge and inspire during a time when people had a greater attention span than we have today through the only medium they had for transmitting ideas from a distance.

This week, something unusual happened within our own denomination. Rev. John Dorhauer, our General Minister and President, sent out a letter to the entire UCC that congregations are invited to share with their members in whichever way they deem fit. This is not something that happens a lot. The letter says this:

Dear Partners in Christ:

The vision of a body united –in purpose, in mission, in vision – is one that inspired the birth of our denomination. All of our spiritual impulses reverberate in an effort to call us into a more perfect union. Throughout our shared history as a people of faith and as a part of the Body of Christ, we have challenged ourselves to widen the circle of inclusion. Widening the circle has always come with growth pains as we shed old skins and welcome those whom we had previously thought unwelcome. And, with each new articulation of a more fully expressed Body of Christ we have realized new joy. Through it all, we remain focused on the call to be one, and committed to meeting the challenges inherent in that call.

Let me stop right there for a moment. Imagine this letter is read a thousand years from now. Taken by itself and out of context, this is a broad theological statement that stands on its own. But there is context. Rev. Dorhauer continues:

We are now living in and through a season when the threats to unity are legion. Talk of walls that mark refugees as threats, labels like 'terrorist' that attach too easily to Muslims, overt racial bias that normalizes fear and hatred, a pandemic of abuse to women with the trigger reflex to forgive the men who author that abuse have turned

America into a land many of us no longer recognize and that too many of us are finding harder and harder to reconcile with our faith.

That part adds an important context to this letter. It adds the “why” for the letter. Rev. Dorhauer didn’t write the first paragraph with the intent of stating a theological point for the sake of making a theological point, it’s because of the time and context that we find ourselves in. He continues:

Now more than ever, the Holy Spirit of the Living God and the Risen Christ is seeking to partner with anyone committed to unifying the human community. The gospel mandate to love our neighbor as we love ourselves resonates deep within us. It calls for the better angels among and within us, to always resist impulses to hate, to condemn, to vilify, or to castigate. In such a time as this, the United Church of Christ’s call to fulfill the prayer of Jesus, that they may all be one, stands as an urgent mandate to disciples who envision a just world for all.

*United with you in God’s service,
John Dorhauer*

Some of the basic ideas in this letter are timeless, but what makes it poignant, for us, is that we are in the middle of the context he writes about. The letter builds a foundation, states the problem and calls us to action. Again, although letters from our national church are not unusual in and of themselves, this one is different.

We are fortunate, now, that church in Corinth was having some problems, then, because out of this came Paul’s inspiration to try to get them on the right path. The wisdom of this guidance is wisdom we still depend on, today, but it’s frequently out of context.

Corinth was a crossroads for the Mediterranean world and that made it a great place to start a movement but a hard place to start a movement, too. It was sort of a mix of New York and Las Vegas where a whole lot of people were getting rich from trade and many others were passing through; hoping that what happened in Corinth stayed in Corinth. In both the church and the wider culture, some people’s gifts and value were getting lifted up over other gifts. There were some squabbles over right behavior and wrong behavior, as well as power and authority in the church. Paul was calling this out with a spirit of authority and pointing towards a better way.

This is a community Paul loved. Paul was saying that we make Christ’s church *dysfunctional* when we insist that any one part is better or more important than another; that when the church acts as independent parts, as opposed to a whole, the body doesn’t work. Paul was calling them to be an egalitarian, unified community that had a sense of equity and

understood their responsibility to be the Holy Spirit filled and motivated presence of Christ in the world. Paul was making it clear that this is the way they were called to *be* Christ, now.

So, if we take in the urgency of these teachings and apply it to the urgency of now, something different starts to happen to these lesson. They come alive. Instead of Christ being a mystical, spiritual presence, *collectively* we become Christ through holy and sacred bonds. If, as in Luke, we are the inheritors of the Spirit of God, we have to open ourselves up to God's enlivening and incarnation through us as the Body of Christ. This means that Luke reads something like this:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon us,
because God has anointed us
to bring good news to the poor.
God has sent us to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to those who lack vision,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.
Today this scripture must be fulfilled."

A couple years ago, I read a piece about a person who had lived through the Franco regime in Spain, and she was quoted saying something like this: "You know the most insidious piece about Fascism? Life seems to go on as normal."

We are in the middle of one of the most significant homelessness crises of the past 50 years and, for most of us, life seems to go on as normal. More people are dying from opioid addiction, now, than people died from AIDS during the height of the HIV epidemic and, for most of us, life seems to go on as normal. Victims of US international policy are coming to the US for refuge and being turned back to places where they have a good chance of being killed and, for most of us, life seems to go on as normal. Climate change is not just here, but the rate of change is actually picking up and, for most of us, life seems to go on as normal. Our personal information had been monetized as we've moved from being regarded as a customer to raw materials and, for most of us, life seems to go on as normal. People who have worked for years to uncover and celebrate the full spectrum of our sexual and gender variety are being covered up and denied existence again and, for most of us, life seems to go on as normal. Our country is tearing itself apart and, for most of us, life seems to go on as normal.

Westminster, you are 140 years old. Your roots are deep and your branches stretch further than you might imagine. You have done an amazing job looking back at who you have been, for better and for worse, in your history with an honesty and humility that impresses me. I want to suggest something to you. I think that it's possible that your first 140 years were

how God was preparing you for this one; that this is the moment you were created for. It is tempting to just look back and see the numbers of people who attended church here, compare it to now and determine yourselves lacking but - the way I understand God's calling to the church - it's not about how many are inside the walls of a church that count but how many are served *by* those inside the walls and, indeed, with the walls of the church. I think - by your involvement in social justice work, service and charity - you are serving more now than you ever have before. Your willingness to open up your church to those who are in need of a warm place, is just one more example of this.

My siblings in Christ, your first 140 years was hard work, but ultimately, good practice for being Christ in this time and place. Your first 140 years had several moments of risk and trust as you strove to serve God and God's people, and that was good practice for being open to the way the Spirit is going to fill you and move you at this time and place. I'm thrilled to celebrate with you 140 years but that's not nearly as exciting to me as what I believe the Spirit may be doing with you right now.

And, yes, there will be a cost at times. You may not feel as safe sometimes. You're going to mess things up once in awhile. You're going to have to give more time and money than sometimes feels comfortable. But all that pales to this one reality: God needs a church like Westminster for this moment and this time in history on this corner in the middle of this city in this country in this world to be part of creating a world that is better. God needs you to be open to being filled by the Spirit and pushed by the Spirit to be Christ in the world.

My siblings in Christ, I invite you to repeat after me:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon us,
because God has anointed us
to bring good news to the poor.
God has sent us
to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight
to the those who lack vision,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.
Today this scripture
must be fulfilled.”

Amen.