

February 3, 2019/Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:21-30;

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"At What Cost?"

We continue with where we were last week in Luke's gospel. Jesus has been baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist and there experienced powerfully the coming of the Holy Spirit upon him. He is then driven, *"full of the Holy Spirit"* into the wilderness where he experiences temptation, trial, and hunger, at the hands of his own inner demons, and emerges from that 40-day wrestling, with a new sense of identity, a clear vision of his ministry, of his call from God.

Luke then tells us that he *"returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee."* We might imagine him, striding confidently, walking full stride from village to village, speaking in their Synagogues. He is certain of his mission, impressing all the people with his message, his abilities to heal and restore the sick and disabled. But he also carries with him the power to restore the down hearted, the disenfranchised, to bring hope to the hopeless and meaning to those for whom life had become bereft of life.

And it is with this reputation that he enters his home town, Nazareth. The place he grew up. The place where people know him. Perhaps it had been some years since he had been there. Perhaps he had been gone away and now he has returned, a strong and intriguing young man, about 30 years of age. He is no longer the boy they once knew. He is all grown up now and his reputation precedes him and they welcome him into their midst.

Then in the Synagogue, he reads from the prophet, Isaiah. *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."* And then he tells them that today, *"today"* in their hearing, as they have heard him speak these words, that scripture, that prophecy has come to fulfillment. In him.

And they are so impressed! They love him! They are excited about him being with them and about his ministry he seems intent on proclaiming. Luke tells us they spoke well of him at that point, so impressed with his learning and his ability to speak, they are proud of their home town boy.

But then he has to go and spoil it. He says to them those offensive, off putting words: *"Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'* And then he goes on to remind them that prophets are never accepted in their own homes, and he reminds them of the stories about how Elijah and Elisha, the two great prophets of Israel's history, were sent to save those from other lands, a woman of Sidon, and a Syrian general, an *enemy* of their people. Not people like themselves.

And of course, they take offense! They get so angry that they push him out of the Synagogue and to the edge of the cliff on which their village sets, ready to throw him down to his death, they are so enraged! But he walks past them all. And he leaves his family and friends behind him and goes on his way.

What is this all about? Why does Jesus do this? And here, right at the beginning of his ministry?

It is apparent, that the story of this man whom the gospel writers tell us is the Christ, the manifestation of God in the world, is a story that right from the start, there is a cost, that says there are consequences that one will experience as a result of leading the life that he has chosen, that comes when one answers and accepts the call of God.

Today, we have commissioned a group of people who will lead our church in the coming year. And I want so much to thank you for taking on the jobs that you have accepted and to encourage you in what you understand as your mission here in this place, this First Church in Belfast, United Church of Christ. I want you to know that you are fully supported by Kate and I and that the whole congregation stands with and beside you as you move forward in this endeavor.

Because, I believe, more than ever, that what we do here, as a community of faith, as a people with the responsibility to carry the message of Christ's gospel, to spread the love and compassion of God to the whole world, is now, more vital and necessary than it has been in a very long, long time. And that what we are *all* called to, will take courage, it will take patience, it will take fortitude and perseverance. It will require cooperation and striving together. There will be times of hard and heartfelt conversations of difficult and controversial issues, and while we will always respect and appreciate one another, it may not always be easy.

There will be times when we experience the joy and the exuberance of accomplishing great things together. But there will also be times, if we are to truly take on important and meaningful work together, there will also be times when there is a *cost*.

As pastors, we don't talk too much about the cost of our work with you. But it is important for you to understand. Accepting the call of God and giving yourself over to whatever work God has called you to, can be a difficult road. There are a lot of things that make it tough. Making difficult and unpopular decisions, putting in extra time to make sure our church is welcoming and inviting. Calling friends to accountability. Giving up things that we love or make us feel important.

Before Kate accepted that call from God to ordained ministry, she was a focused academic, working on her graduate studies at Northwestern University. She was a rising star and many of her advisers sought to have her begin writing her books. But she heard a different call from God, the call to work within the church. But I think that was a real struggle for her. She could have become the *writer*, could have been published and known in the world. Instead she chose to be a teacher and pastor, a servant for God.

For me, one of the most difficult things is being so far away from my family. Hardly a day goes by when I wish I could visit one of my siblings, or go to the Cousins Lunches that they have back in Wisconsin every couple months, or to go and watch my niece's boys compete in wrestling tournaments or watch my nephew's children in a school play. Or to see friends that I grew up with or just be in the places, the geography of the farm land and the lakes and streams that I knew.

I know that many of you will understand this desire for family, as I have heard so often, from many of our members, that family is the most important thing there is. But when you answer the call of God, and I am not just talking about those who answer the call of God to ordained ministry, but to

whatever you understand your true vocation to be. When you give yourself fully to God and to God's purposes, neither family, nor nation, nor worldly fame, nor any other thing can take top priority. Answering the call and living out your dedication to that call, must become the most important thing in your life.

And so it goes without saying, that there will be a cost involved whenever we accept the call of God into our lives. There will be times when difficult decisions will need to be made. There will be times when you have to do or say things that are not popular. There will be times when you might have to listen to others and accept their criticism and learn a new way. There may be times when you will wonder if it is all worth it.

But, it must also be said, that when we know, when we really know and understand what God wants us to do, whether it is with this life that we've been given, or even if it is only a small job or a seemingly insignificant thing that we feel the Spirit is pushing us to do, when we say "yes" to that, and give it all that we've got, and really put our whole selves into it, we may then experience the most amazing, rewarding, satisfying and fulfilling feeling that we will ever know. It is then, that we are truly ourselves!

The prophet Jeremiah received the call from God but was afraid of that call. He told God that he could not go out and do public speaking, he was too shy. He told God that he was not old enough, he was only a boy. What experience did he have? He could not possibly do what God was calling him to do. But God assured him, "*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you;*"

We, like Jeremiah, may be afraid, may be uncertain of what we are getting ourselves into. We may be unsure if we are willing to bear the cost. But God does not call us to anything that God will not prepare us for, nor will God ever leave us on our own. God knows us inside and out, better than we can even know ourselves.

So, as we continue to move forward into this new year, let us remember those words Jesus spoke at the beginning of his ministry, those words that Kate reminded us last week are words that we can also claim. "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon us!*" May we answer the call of that Spirit, together! Amen.