

## “The Spirit of Empowerment”

Sermon by Dan Harrison, Pastor at Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, VA 5/31/20

*Isaiah 40:3-5; Luke 4:17-19*

Today is Pentecost Sunday, the day Christians celebrate God’s gifting of the Holy Spirit to the world. The truth the Spirit of God has always been here. We have plenty of proof of God’s spirit at work long before the Day of Pentecost we read in Acts. That’s not to say the display we read about in Acts is something awe-inspiring and affirming for the followers of Jesus at the time... It was most certainly an affirmation that God was with them, and there is no doubt that God is actively interacting with the world today as well.

In light of the pain we see today within our communities of color throughout the this country, people justifiably grief stricken by atrocities committed towards them as a people, the systemic racist culture that has found itself burrowed so deeply into the very institutions designed to protect all citizens—it is absolutely sickening and must be confronted. The mass protests going on even as I speak, throughout the land that we call home, gives us pause and reason to question: What can I do? What can we do as a community? For we know one thing is true: We MUST do something.

From the start of Jesus’ ministry we see his cousin John (the Baptist) who using the scripture from Isaiah 40 to affirm his cousin’s anointed prophet status, and his own in response to the religious leaders of the day who asked him “Who are you?” He responded in the words of the Prophet Isaiah, *“I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'”* Certainly it wasn’t just by happenstance that John uses this particular scripture; it set the stage for a grander reckoning of justice. Later in the same story John says of his cousin, “I saw the Spirit come down on him as a dove and remain.” John is pointing to Jesus as the one to bring Justice back to land. What a political hornet’s nest this must have stirred at the time, and we know the outcome, don’t we? Eventually both of them were killed as a result.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. understood the Isaiah 40 passage well and as many of you already know he quoted from it in his “I Have a Dream” speech: “I have a dream that one day **every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.**” Justice requires a great equalization. People of power and position must abdicate their privilege and those oppressed and marginalized must be raised up... they must be equalized. It is the only way!

I have told this story before but I feel I should share it again. A few years back NPR had a radio call-in for the Christmas season; “Your favorite memories of Christmas,” where callers would call in and leave messages of their favorite memories of Christmas and then they would be later played on the radio. I was listening as I driving from a young father’s particular story about his four-year-old daughter. He spoke about a Bible he and his wife had given her the Christmas before—a children’s Bible, full of colorful illustrations. The young girl skipped through it one day, looking at the stories of Jesus. The dad was happy to answer her questions. She saw Jesus in the manger in the stable, and then healing people

throughout the land. Later she was looking and saw where Jesus even brought his friend Lazarus back to life. She was amazed. He even told her, "People loved him not just because of the miracles but because he preached about love and peace." Then on another day, later, he found her crying in her bedroom, holding her Bible. She had found the page where Jesus was killed. "He said I'm so sorry, honey." She sobbed, "They killed Jesus, daddy? Even after all the good things he did?" And he sadly replied "yes." About a month had passed and he had forgotten all about it until she had a day off from her pre-school and he took the day off of work to be with her. It was a Monday. She asked, "What holiday is today?" He said, "Martin Luther King Day." They had gone out for ice cream. "What did Martin Luther King do?" He excitedly began to tell her all about his life and all the wonderful things he had done for the people during the Civil Rights movement, and how he had preached about love and peace. Then she quickly chimed in matter-of-factly, "Then they killed him, right?" The father was stunned as he eeked out a simple, sad, "yes, honey."

There is a sickness in humanity that seeks to squash any and all that threatens one group's superiority or privilege over another. It can be in the small things. Ruth at the grocery store with a much larger white man, unmasked, closing in on her personal space at the self-check-out, and when asked by the staff to step back at least six feet, says angrily "No, I know my rights." And then taunts my wife attempting to work a broken machine with her debit card, saying, "You probably don't have enough money to pay for it." In our culture, such a dialogue would most likely not happen from a person of color to a white person—but it could easily happen from a white person to a person of color. Do you see (and hopefully "feel") the problem? There is an underlying sickness in our culture, and deep disdain for Black and Brown peoples—those who in effect represent the native peoples of this land and the enslaved workers brought over to exploit the land from those natives—all at the hands of their European conquerors.

You can't erase history, but you can change our culture. What was Jesus' message? What was his Gospel, if you will? Well that's easy. He gave it to us in Luke 4 when he rolled out the scroll and read from the prophet Isaiah—claiming the Spirit of God was on him and that he came to preach the good news (Evangelos=Gospel) to the poor, free the oppressed and imprisoned, and bring sight to the blind. That's it! That's actually the Gospel. And some of us thought it was that he came and died on the cross and rose again and offers forgiveness for sins for only those who believe, etc. Nope. Those are interesting things to explore as well, but that's not the Gospel itself. That's just poor hermeneutics, otherwise. So, if you believe in this message from Isaiah, the "Evangelos" or "good news" that Jesus preached, well then I guess you're an "evangelical," right? The only problem is that another group has already kind of taken the title. When Jesus reads from the Isaiah passage or when his cousin John previously used another passage from Isaiah to describe himself and Jesus, the Spirit of God is included. Without God's Spirit, there seems to be some sort of futility to their mission. God's Spirit is key and for us, as Christians, we surrender to this idea of folding ourselves back into God's presence in order to move forward.

Jesus talks about this in the form of "abiding" or "housing oneself" —we seek shelter in him as he seeks shelter in God (John 15), right? This is how we abide in one another. Jesus also talks about his in terms of remaining in God by remaining in him. Several of us retreated together (virtually) yesterday and I was really struck during my silent contemplation by how Adam and Eve heard God walking in the garden

after they'd eaten the fruit. Unfortunately, they were afraid. But we shouldn't be. We should be listening to God's footsteps all around us and not ignore them. God is present. Even in the chaos and the pain, God is here. We need justice to find itself and we serve a God of Justice. Jesus said, *"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you"* (Matt 7:7). So there's instruction right there that we must ask (aka prayer) but also we MUST knock, right? And knocking takes physical, tangible, action! Don't be shy. KNOCK HARD! Justice comes by knocking. John the Baptist knocked. Jesus the Messiah knocked. Martin Luther King Jr. knocked. May the last 12 people killed at the hands of injustice be the last 12 ever, but we must knock. If you spend more time worrying about the looting than you do about the racist underpinnings of our culture, then you are not knocking—I would say you are sitting and critiquing. Knock. Knock. And knock again. Justice comes with those who dare to stand up for the oppression of others.

Knock.