

“The Spirit of Christ”

Luke 4:14-30

April 22, 2007

The horrible events of the past week at Virginia Tech changed the course of this sermon. Preachers are taught you need to have an open Bible in one hand and the front page of the newspaper in the other. Sometimes, you have to address the front page first.

I spent an inordinate amount of time last Monday and Friday watching the news. On Monday, the big story, as far as I was concerned, was the Nor'Easter; the weather system making its way up the east coast and causing terrible problems for travelers. I was due to fly out to Philadelphia and was debating whether to postpone. Then, the news began to break: one person had been killed in a shooting on the Virginia Tech Campus. About an hour later, as I was getting ready to leave for one o'clock flight, the flash came on that more than twenty people had been killed. When I landed in Phoenix, the number had risen to thirty-three including the gunman.

By Friday – as I was headed home – like many of you, I had listened to the news reports about this individual. I heard how one of his English professors had recommended he seek counseling because of the disturbingly violent creative writing stories he handed in. I also listened as questions were asked about, “how do you stop this from happening?” Look at the terrible grief and sadness and loss and hurt and anguish caused by the act of one individual.

There are two things I want to point out about this incident before we move on to our text. First, the world will go a long way to try to deny the spiritual source of this tragedy: evil is real. The demonic is real. NBC sought to explain their airing of the shooter's video material by saying, “We need to understand more about what he was thinking.” I do not know about that: the more we try to rationalize and “understand” evil behavior, the more we invite others to act out on evil impulses.

We cannot pretend to live in a value neutral or spiritually neutral world. This incident is like others before – Santee, Columbine, Waco, the Oklahoma City bombing, not to mention 9/11 and suicide bombers – showing us evil is real, the demonic really seeks to destroy. The answer to the question, “how could this happen?” is not so tough to answer: this act was demonic. Even so, I do not want this to sound like I am minimizing the culpability of the gunman by saying, “the devil made me do it.” He is absolutely personally responsible. Yet it would be foolhardy to miss the comparison to the demonic activity Jesus encountered in the gospels; people cutting themselves, striking fear in others, throwing themselves on fire. What would it take for us to recognize and admit the demonic origin of this act?

These killings were fueled by hate, driven by a desire to destroy, and committed with a lust of self-righteous power that was devoid of love. Those are the footprints of the demonic. We grieve, but should not be surprised. Though the details are shocking, the cause is not new: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” Ephesians 6:12.

The second thing I want you to notice is how we are all reacting to this terrible sinful act. We feel sick about it. Our hearts break. It is incomprehensible to us. As I mentioned previously, there is grief and sadness and loss and hurt and anguish caused by the act of one individual. Here is the rub: this is how God looks on our sin – your sin and mine, no matter how big or small we think it is. Our sin grieves, saddens, hurts and anguishes God. Our little white lies or gossip or greed or whatever it is; God sees it as if it was on all the major networks and cable stations in all its detail. And it breaks his heart.

The difference, however, is what brings us to our text today. We are rightly revolted and scandalized by the egregious evil perpetrated by this individual – just as God is revolted and scandalized by our egregious sin against his holiness. But the Bible tells us, “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” What did God do about sin? He sent Jesus Christ to die for us, so that all who proclaim him Lord and Savior and believe in their heart that God raised him from the dead will be saved. In short, God gave hope to the hopeless, life to the dead, grace to all of us on whom judgment rightly rests.

Turn with me to Luke 4:14-30.

1. Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Keep your Bibles open and look at the context here: Luke is relating the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. A few verses earlier, in 3:16-17 when John the Baptist is preaching. John’s big line of prediction, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

Then, when John baptizes Jesus, the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. (3:22). The Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness – wherein Jesus is tempted by the devil. (4:1) The Holy Spirit filled Jesus with power as he began to minister throughout Galilee. (4:14). Then, Jesus comes to his home town and preaches about how he is the fulfillment of a well-known prophesy which begins with the declaration that “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” Following this encounter in his home town, in 4:33 he goes to Capernaum, where a man with the “spirit of an unclean demon” cries out, “Let us alone! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”

Luke is driving home the point that Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit. He was filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. The demonic spirits rebelling against God recognized and feared Jesus. This man – flesh and blood like you and me – was filled with the Holy Spirit. This man – flesh and blood like you and me – experienced temptation and persecution and attack from spiritual beings fighting the sovereignty of God. This man – flesh and blood like you and me – spoke about the fulfillment of God’s centuries-old promises.

The Isaiah text (Isaiah 61) was written more than five hundred years before Jesus’ birth. Think about that; the Declaration of Independence is only 225 years old. This part of Isaiah was written during a time when Israel was in exile. It was written as a word of comfort from God; that God was not done with Israel. The judgment entered upon Israel for failing to abide by the covenant was complete. Two things are important about this: one, the judgment is entirely satisfied. God

announces that the time of judgment has been completed. The second is that God himself is drawing his people to himself. He has done the work of restoration: “I will joyfully exult in Yahweh; my soul will triumph in my God; for he has clad me in garments of salvation; he has spread over me a cloak of righteousness.”

This text was something that Jesus’ hometown crowd would have known as a promise of God. To hear that it was fulfilled in their time was remarkable. To hear it from someone they knew was unbelievable. They could not recognize God acting personally and within their own time and experience.

Friends, God does act personally. God does act within our time and experience. The Holy Spirit in Jesus Christ fulfills the promises of God that are centuries old. And if that is true, how much more true are the promises we heard last week about the Holy Spirit being with us, helping us, teaching us, building us up, and confirming in us all Jesus said and commanded!

2. The Holy Spirit leads us in ways that do not always make sense to others.

Our focus today is on the Holy Spirit, so I am only going to briefly touch on the rest of Jesus’ confrontation with the people in his hometown. He perceives their muttering, “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” or, “who does he think he is?” He points out their rejection and describes to them how the prophets were not received by those to whom the prophets were sent; and the benefits of the prophet were realized by others than those to whom they had been sent. This is what makes the people of Nazareth so angry – Jesus tells them their rejection of him means the benefit of his gift of the Holy Spirit will be received by others. They get so angry he is not playing by their rules that they take him up to a cliff to hurl him off – the first step in a stoning and a preview of what will happen in Christ’s passion.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon Jesus. The people of Nazareth fail to discern it. They have heard the great things Jesus did elsewhere and need to see something amazing themselves. However, The leading of the Holy Spirit leads Jesus into direct confrontation with the powers and expectations of this world. Jesus’ unwillingness to do a miracle does not make sense to the people of Nazareth; they miss the miracle of his proclamation. The Holy Spirit’s work in Christ’s life and in our lives does not always make sense to others. Consider for example forgiveness and hope.

Forgiveness

On May 13, 1981, Pope John Paul II was shot in St. Peter’s Square. The assassin was caught and sentenced to life in prison. The Pope asked people to pray for the man, “whom I have sincerely forgiven.” The Pope spoke with the man privately in 1983. He was in touch with the man’s family, meeting his mother in 1987 and his brother in 1997. The man was pardoned in 2000 at the Pope’s request (at which point he was extradited to prison in Turkey for crimes committed prior to the assassination attempt). In February 2005, the man sent the Pope a letter wishing him well. When the Pope died, the man’s entire family grieved and reported how the Pope had been a great friend to them.

Forgiveness is a manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the power of Jesus on the cross. Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.” Has someone done you wrong? Has someone gossiped about you? Has someone taken something that belonged to you? Did you lose a promotion or an opportunity unfairly? If so – and for most people, they can say yes to at least one of those – how has the Holy Spirit moved in you? Are you holding onto that slight, that wrong, that grievance as your right? Or, have you taken steps to effect reconciliation? Even where you were wronged, when someone else has sinned against you, have you reached out to demonstrate your love for them? I know, I know, “But they...” Forgiveness is something that does not always make sense to the world; it is characteristic of Christ and is a manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit.

Hope

Further, Jesus’ message in the power of the Holy Spirit is one of hope: good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, letting the oppressed go free; the year of the Lord’s favor. That is eternal good news. It is timeless.

It is the hope that our sins can be forgiven. All of our wrongs have been washed away – no to make them right but not being held against us. The terrible judgment has been satisfied by Christ’s suffering and death on the cross. For many people, this is the stumbling block. “I have done things too horrible, too painful, too terrible to be forgiven. A holy God could not love me.” Or, “how can what Christ did mean anything to me?”

Jesus has the authority to proclaim that message of hope because of the power of the Holy Spirit manifested in his life: he was anointed, he was obedient, and, most of all, he was raised from the dead through the power of the Holy Spirit. He is who he said, he did what he promised.

This is my body, broken for you. This is my blood shed for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in remembrance of me.

I went home this past week to finish closing out my Mom’s house – the house where I grew up. Part of that job involved going through paperwork and things that my parents had saved. It was both nostalgic and humbling. Report cards, letters, notes – things that I had long since forgotten. There were good and then there were some, well, not-so-good. When I look back and see the path that I have walked and the times and the ways that I have hurt others, I have acted selfishly, I have done things about which I am not proud; in all of those things I am glad that I have the promise that Jesus has washed me clean. I cannot do it myself and the only peace I have to let me go forward is that peace that comes from the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of the raised, living, and reigning Jesus Christ – that I have been forgiven.

Conclusion

The Spirit of Christ is power of God to salvation for those who believe. Those who would deny Jesus would deny the power of the Holy Spirit. Those who receive him know that power of forgiveness and the peace that comes with hope. In this week where we have witnessed so much

horror and pain, and where we have seen the world try to explain away the demonic, it is a tremendous comfort to Christians to remember that the Holy Spirit that filled Jesus Christ is dwelling in us.

- It is in the *sighs* of the Spirit that we grieve at the consequences of sin;
- it is in the *power* of the Spirit that know the grace incarnate in Jesus Christ;
- it is in the *mission* of the Spirit that we are confirmed in the hope of our salvation; our salvation which has been assured through Christ.

Gunmen do not have the final word, demons hold no ultimate power over Christ, and God's word is eternally true. The promises God makes, God fulfills. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, who was upon Christ,

Because [God] has anointed him to bring good news to the poor. He has sent him to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

When you go home today, go in the confidence of the power of the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of the conquering Lord Jesus Christ, who was, and is, and is to come.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

(8:45 prayer and offering)

(10:00 offering)