

# The Spirit Is Upon Me

Luke's account of Jesus' life is different from the other three gospels, in that it



**Michael K. Olmsted**

was written by a Gentile physician (Colossians 4:14) and was dedicated to another Gentile named Theophilus (Lk. 1:1-4). "Theophilus" means "friend of God" and may have been used to mask the identity of the recipient for his safety.

Within the empire, religion was commonly seen as separate from ethical behavior and a reflection of reality beyond this physical world. Also, more than the other gospels, Luke emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit throughout the entire life of Jesus. He is also very observant that this Savior from the "true" God is concerned about people the world brushes aside: women, the poor, the marginalized. In his first chapter, Luke tells of the angel Gabriel's announcement to Zechariah and Elizabeth that their surprise baby boy will be the Spirit-filled herald of Jesus the Messiah (Lk. 1:35, 41, 67-79). Luke also tells about Jesus being led into the wilderness by the Spirit for forty days of temptations by the devil (Lk. 4:1-14).

It is also noteworthy that Luke understands what we moderns describe as Jesus' formal announcement of his ministry in his hometown synagogue. Although we do not know whether Jesus chose Isaiah 61:1-2 as his text for that day, we do know that there were designated texts to be read on any sabbath and a recognized teacher would have been invited to speak. The Jews, under the military domination of Rome, yearned for the promised Messiah to appear and bring them independence and greatness as in the time of King David. I suspect the text was assigned to that day and, with the exciting stories already beginning to circulate about Jesus, that he was prepared not just to identify himself, but to define his ministry: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor ... 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" (vv. 18-19).

The prophet Isaiah's words were exceptionally powerful for Jews at this point in their history because they compared their position under domination by Rome with their exile and destruction of the Temple by Babylon – an oppression that God would remove with a new king-deliverer like David. They were wrapping the hope of God's grace in a shroud of military might and political power.

So what Jesus was saying, even though it repeated the preaching of the ancient prophets, was lost in that first century generation's calculated agenda. The wrapping of politics in religious trappings continues in our day when religious leaders and groups abandon biblical teachings and twist the words of Jesus to suit political agendas.

Throughout my years in ministry I have heard harmful if not slanderous words used during political campaigns:

- "This is God's man (woman?) for our time"
- "Government has no business providing health care or help for the poor"
- "God helps those who help themselves"
- "Morality is nobody's business as long as our (politicians) can make this country great like it used to be!"

*(As I heard a preacher once say, "Don't shoot me ... I'm just repeating what I've been hearing.")*

Jesus did not read or expound on the entire Isaiah passage that day in Nazareth. Isaiah 61:1-3 includes "the day of vengeance of our God" (v. 2). This omission does not mean Jesus is editing the text to avoid the negative. He never sidestepped reality, but Jesus pointed to the life-changing hope of God's grace, the possibilities that only God's Spirit can bring into our imperfect lives. John 3:16-18 includes the amazing statement: "For God did not send his Son into the world to judge the world; but that the world should be saved through him."

The synagogue crowd didn't much care for Jesus' preaching that day because when he was done with the Isaiah text with its mention of God's blessings on

non-Jews and the afflicted, they rose up in wrath and tried to throw Jesus off a cliff (Lk. 4:23-30)!

As "Jesus people" what do we do with this Isaiah passage? What is the Holy Spirit urging and empowering us to do? Is our faith practiced in the safe confines of our home and church or do we involve ourselves in sharing the grace of God with the homeless, the hungry and those who do not have enough to meet their basic needs? There are opportunities and ministries to provide food for children who cannot buy a school lunch; there are shelters where people can find a safe place to sleep, shower, wash clothes and get help beginning life again. There are opportunities for us to speak about compassion, integrity and the decent treatment of all people.

Probably the greatest challenge to the church as God's witness and ministry is our isolation in our buildings and programs. There was a magnificent temple in Jerusalem in Jesus' day, a significant organization of biblical scholars who could teach, along with synagogues across the empire, but all those resources were closed away from the world in organized religion.

Isaiah's text, "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (v. 19) is most likely a reference to the "year of Jubilee" described in Leviticus 25. Jubilee was to be celebrated every seventh year and forty-ninth year in Israel. Four specific actions were to be taken in Jubilee: all slaves were to be set free; all financial debts were to be canceled; all land was to be restored to the original owner; and the year was to be a sabbatical of limited labor and break from routine. Sadly, there is no record that Jubilee was ever celebrated! For all the history of Israel, all the prophets, all the promises and blessings of God, Israel continuously failed to embody God's message of love and hope to the world.

Jesus was announcing the ultimate "Jubilee," the promise of God's grace for a broken world. Have we heard Jesus' words in Nazareth that day long ago any better than did his own people? Our hope from God is new life through faith in Jesus. He is our jubilee! His love is what we must share every day.