
The Ministry of the Spirit

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, December 17, 2017,
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

If I say the word ‘Spirit’ you may think breath, wind, fire, creation, God, Trinity, Pentecost, Pentecostal, tongues, upper room, the book of Acts, dancing, clapping, prayer, baptism, water, community, alcohol, or even airlines. That one word—spirit—brings many images to mind. I wonder if what the prophet Isaiah mentions comes to mind for us when we think ‘spirit.’ “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn...” Do we associate the Spirit with these people? The oppressed, the broken-hearted, the captives, the prisoners, and those mourning? How appropriate to hear, during this season, about those who mourn lest we forget those who endure grief during this Advent season over the loss of loved ones or not-so-good-memories at this time of the year. The Spirit doesn’t forget.

“The Spirit is upon me and anointed me”; that sounds good. “He has sent me”; okay, I get that because God sends people on spring break mission trips through the Chapel. “He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners...to comfort all who mourn.” I get God sending people on a mission but notice to whom the Spirit sends us! The oppressed, the brokenhearted, captives, prisoners, those who mourn. Life was hard in this historical context for the people who returned from Babylonian exile as their hopes were dashed because life wasn’t what they imagined it would be post-exile. It wasn’t a grand homecoming party.

They were still in pain and what we might observe is that the Spirit resides in or at least the Spirit sends us to the place of pain where the people are in pain. Remember, at the beginning of creation, the Spirit was present when darkness covered the face of the deep. And at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus, even when he was full of the Spirit, the Spirit leads him into the wilderness and the Spirit is the one who led Ezekiel into a valley of dry bones, dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones. It’s as if Isaiah gives us a glimpse of God’s social imagination for ministry with this focus on the suffering ones. The oppressed, the broken-hearted, the captives, the prisoners, the mourning. The Spirit, to use the phrase of Toni Morrison, centers on “the hurt of the hurt world.” Even when Jesus begins his ministry, these words of Isaiah are part of his stump speech in the Spirit. They reveal the priorities of his princely, powerful presence. The Spirit appears to specialize in ministry among those whose “backs are against a wall” (Howard Thurman) or those who are imprisoned by confining walls. In terms of modern day prisons, a historian of CIA secret prison experiments in interrogation techniques notes, “If subjects are confined without light, odors, sound, or any fixed references of time and place, very deep breakdowns can be provoked” (Jane Mayer). It is precisely there, at the broken moments of broken people in broken spaces, where the Spirit breaks in and does ministry. The Spirit breaks our brokenness.

We find God most often with the “wretched refuse” (Emma Lazarus) or “the wretched of the earth” (Franz Fanon). God, the Spirit, sends us to them, to those no one else wants to encounter, to those on the borders, to those outside of our pristine neighborhoods; you know ‘those’ people. God chooses those who are foolish, the weak, the low and despised in the world (1 Cor. 1). God chooses to serve the oppressed, the broken-hearted, the captives, the prisoners, the mourning. This is the church’s mission in the power of the Spirit because the Spirit moves us in this direction.

Why does the Spirit work on behalf of those on the underside of life, “the hurt of this hurt world”? Why such a focus on the suffering ones? It may be because this is who God is in God’s own self—“I was hungry... I was thirsty... I was a stranger...I was naked....I was sick... I was in prison...” “I was oppressed. I was brokenhearted. I was captive. I mourned.” The Spirit prioritizes people in pain because maybe God is a crucified God who is acquainted with human grief, sorrow, and suffering. It’s not just that the Spirit ministers to these people, but that the Christ, the anointed one, Jesus, is actually one of them. The ministry of the Spirit is intertwined with who God is. This emphasis is tied to God’s nature and it is a focus that should cause us pause this Advent, as many of us bask in the consumeristic glory of presents and shopping. The coming or the mission of the Messiah, really has nothing to do with wrapped gifts. But it has everything to do with a ministry to, with, and for those on the margins—those in East LA or East Harlem or East Durham.

As Christians, when we think theologically, meaning when we think about God, we should be thinking at the margins. When we do theological work, that is, Christian mission, we should engage the margins, being with and for those on the margins. Without this focus, without this distinct ministry of the Spirit, it may be a sign that we are without the fullness of God’s love in our hearts. Without this focus, without this ministry of the Spirit, we may be following institutional Christianity, but not necessarily the Christ of anointed ministry. This is why throughout church history some ministers and theologians have made a distinction between Christianity and the religion of Jesus.

We may be losing touch with the Spirit of God if we shy away from the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captives, the prisoners, the mourning, because this is the primary mission of God in the world and a revelation of the embodied life in the Spirit. We have to be careful how we think and talk about those on the margins of society, hopefully avoiding dehumanizing insults. We don’t want to become like the relationship between Lady Astor, the first female member of the British Parliament to take her seat, and Winston Churchill. Once, Lady Astor told Churchill, “If you were my husband, I would give you poison to drink” and he responded, “If I were your husband, I would gladly drink it.” This isn’t how we want to interact with others, especially those who are hurting.

Take a spiritual inventory and ask yourself, “Am I out of touch with ‘the hurt of the hurt world’”? Do we ever consider those who feel like a caged panther’s anguish to whom “...It seems to him there are / a thousand bars, and behind the bars no world” (Rainer Maria Rilke). Are we in touch with the tortured and the tormented? Those who are imprisoned, physically, emotionally, mentally? *We* may not be, but the Spirit is. If we lose touch with the margins, we have lost touch with the heart of God.

“He has sent me to bring good news...” The Spirit moves and leans toward those torn apart and Jesus moves toward a cross. His ministry is proximate to pain, not detached from it. In the ministry of the Spirit, God prioritizes the places of and people in pain. There’s no way around this, if we are following Jesus. The God we serve in Jesus Christ was not of a privileged class. He was a poor

migrant, a marginal figure, yet he was anointed the Messiah. The Spirit moves toward the hurting in order to restore hope and healing.

This outward movement toward those suffering is the way of the Spirit. Many nonprofit organizations may be doing the work of the spirit without even claiming the spirit because their service focuses on the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captives, the prisoners, the mourning. This isn't purely social services; this is the ministry of the Spirit! When I was an undergraduate student over 20 years ago (in other words, when I was 6 years old!), I was an Exploration in Ministry fellow through Memorial Church at Stanford University. The fellowship paired me with a local nonprofit in East Palo Alto. I was placed at an organization that focused on drug and alcohol rehabilitation. That summer, I was assigned a 'father of the streets.' His name was Prince who worked as an outreach coordinator. Everyone in that surrounding area knew Prince. He was totally respected as an elder. He knew people by their first names and they knew him by his first name. In the past, Prince was a dope dealer, but became one of the success stories of those who was delivered from dope addiction. Prince showed me around the neighborhood and as long as I was with Prince, I was in good hands. Prince seemed to never flinch from fear of another.

This became very clear to me one day as we walked to go visit one of his friends. I soon came to realize that we were walking to a crack house. When we arrived, everyone greeted Prince and he walked straight up into the house and to his friend who was sitting on a bed. This gentleman, his friend, was addicted to crack cocaine and was killing himself; he was, as they say, "thin as a rail." Prince just went to the house to check in on him; he was like a local church minister visiting the sick and shut-in. Prince affirmed that man's dignity as a human being even while the crack was stripping this man of his life. Prince refused to dehumanize him and release him to the caged panthers. Prince went to him, not away from him, but toward the one suffering and in pain. He leaned in love toward the oppressed, the captive, the brokenhearted, and saw him as human. Pastor Eugene Cho says, "When we forget the humanity of others, we end up reducing people into projects and God never intended people to be the church's projects." Prince's friend was not a project but a person who wasn't well.

How do we treat those who aren't well, who are captive in some way? How do we treat those who are poor through our policies, protocols, and personalities? Do we live lives that avoid the outcasts and those suffering? Do we construct our daily existence in such a way that we are out of touch with the untouchables and by doing so, lose touch with the mission of God? I raise these questions for us to ponder what it means to be anointed by the Spirit and engage in the ministry of the Spirit.

I say this because the One who is anointed by the Spirit, the coming God, the One who says, "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me," privileges places of and people in pain. And if we are children of God, what does that mean for us? The promise and the hope is that this work of bringing good news, binding up, proclaiming liberty, releasing, and comforting others, brings transformation. The Spirit doesn't ever leave people the same. God transforms the lives of those on the margins and gives garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. What the Spirit does is restore joy, hope, healing, freedom and righteousness to people who once knew only suffering. To proclaim liberty is language linked to the instructions for observing the Jubilee Year. During that year, all debts would be forgiven and property and people held as payment for debt would be able to return to their families, and go back home in safety and gladness.

The ministry of the Spirit moves people from Egypt to a promised land, from a crucifixion to a resurrection, from mourning to gladness, restoring the original joy of the Garden of Eden, the glory of the beginning when God said, “It was good.” Though the Spirit ministers to “the hurt of the hurt world,” the promise of God is that sorrow, oppression, brokenheartedness, captivity, imprisonment, and mourning are not infinite. Pain is not eternal. Praise is. Ashes will vanish and be replaced by hymn sings from the very people we thought had nothing to sing about. In the Spirit, names like ‘outcasts’ become ‘oaks of righteousness.’ In the Spirit, the supposed godforsaken ones are the ones revealing the glory of God. You can never count anyone out because you can never count God out. The Spirit redeems and restores people so that they can return home without regrets and debts to be paid. They can go home and finally be free.

And what I love is that those who may have been counted out are the very ones the community has to count on to help rebuild the society and all that was destroyed. The deemed outcasts are needed and critical to rebuilding a broken society because it was their absence that devastated the community in the first place. It’s remarkable that the oppressed, captive, brokenhearted, the prisoner, the mourning, the ones suffering, end up doing what God did for them. “They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.”

They are the ones the community had been waiting for to help them become whole again. For without that one, missing, or lost community member or son or daughter, we cannot be one, we cannot be whole; we will be ruined. But the Spirit works in such mysterious ways that those whose lives were ruined now were the ones repairing the ruins, those who were devastated now were repairing the devastations, because they’d been touched by the Spirit and so were agents of transformation. The Spirit ministered to them so that they could be ministers.

Sometimes we may think that the ‘least of these’ among us are the objects of ministry, rather than subjects, human beings. But what the Spirit reveals is that those whom we think we are ministering to may be ministering to us without our even knowing it. We need them because the Spirit is working through them to restore us, to rebuild us. God uses the margins, perhaps, to convert us, literally, to turn us, to the Spirit’s way of doing ministry—“to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn...” This is the ministry of the Spirit to which we are called. Will you join me?

In the classic TV series M*A*S*H, set in a mobile army hospital during the Korean War, doctors received a patient who believed he was Jesus Christ. Arnold Chandler had been a bombardier in an airplane and had dropped many bombs on other human beings. Because of the trauma of it all, one day his mind snapped and he decided that he was no longer a man named Arnold Chandler. He was Christ the Lord. This appeared to be a mental condition that would require a lot of therapy. A psychiatrist eventually came to the man and said, “You say you are Christ, and yet here you are in an army hospital in the middle of a war. What would Jesus be doing here?” With tears streaming down his face, this supposed mentally ill man replied with these words: “I am Christ the Lord, Where else should I be? These are my children.” Tear-stained Jesus Christ in the wilderness of war, among the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captives, the prisoners, and all who mourn. Jesus in the power of the Spirit is among us for the Spirit has sent him. He’s coming, even now. May we have eyes to see and ears to hear wherever he may be found.