

## A Sermon for the Occasion of Ordaining New Leaders (During a Pandemic)

### *Luke 4: 16-21*

<sup>16</sup>When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, <sup>17</sup>and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

<sup>18</sup>“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because she has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
She has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
<sup>19</sup>to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

<sup>20</sup>And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. <sup>21</sup>Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

When I was twelve years old, I remember approaching our priest at the Catholic church. I inquired about how I might become a priest myself someday. He replied that 1) I had to clearly understand the traditions and teachings of the church. 2) I had to take vows to be faithful to God; which meant that 3) I had to remain celibate. As a naïve twelve-year-old, I said, “Okay, sounds good! By the way, what is celibate?” To which the priest responded, “It means you can’t ever get married because in a sense you are married to God.” Even as a naïve twelve-year-old, I knew what that meant. And in the upswing of full hormonal development, I knew that wasn’t going to be compelling for me. So I said, “Well, I’m out!” It wasn’t until years later that I discovered the world of Protestantism, where you could have the best of both worlds!

You see, we hear a lot of stories about people who are called into leadership to serve the church. Some have been told they have to deny a certain part of themselves if they want to pursue their calling. Some have been disqualified because of their gender, or their orientation, or because of their past. Some don’t see themselves as leaders because when they look in the mirror they don’t necessarily see a spiritual person, even though we are all spiritual people because we are made in the image of God.

But when we look at the story from Luke’s gospel, we get a sense for what qualifies Jesus. There Jesus is preaching a sermon at his home church when he reads from Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, and she has anointed me to preach good news to the poor...” Then he sits down and preaches a one liner sermon: “Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” While that’s one banger of a first sermon, did you catch the part about Jesus saying he was anointed? Notice we don’t ever hear of Jesus taking ordination exams or learning Greek. While these things are important, they aren’t the meat of what qualifies him. Now if we look, there are only two flashbacks moments when he is anointed by the Spirit which sets the context:

The first flashback is at his baptism. Remember when God's voice appears, "You are my beloved son!" It's the affirming moment which grounds us in our identity.

And the second? Well, that's a bit harder to get excited about. Because the second moment Jesus is anointed is when the Holy Spirit guides Jesus into the wilderness. And who knew that was a prerequisite for being a leader. But it is. And perhaps it always has been.

You see, it is the wilderness where the blueprint we've made for ourselves, gets shredded. It's where the ego is deflated and where we find ourselves powerless and vulnerable. And while it is probably one of the worst feelings in the world, it is also the most necessary if we are called to be a leader. Why? Because only in the wilderness are we acutely aware that we are human. Both limited and full of potential. Both compelled by self-interest and haunted with self-denial. Full of beautiful gifts and deepening insecurities. It's in the wilderness where all of it gets real.

If you have ever asked a seminary student when it was they began to feel like a minister, most—if not all of them—claim it wasn't when they preached their first sermon or spoke a prayer in front of the congregation. It was when they spent some time in the hospital where they were asked to pray with those who just lost their mate, or were battling for their lives, or where they were with people in their most impossible and vulnerable situations. It's true: in the wilderness we discover the depth of our vulnerability because we don't have the magic words to take away the pain, or offer a miracle cure, or a fix everything potion.

What we do have, which perhaps is our greatest asset, *is our presence.*

Jesus says that Isaiah's mission statement has been fulfilled upon their hearing. And if we were to read further into the story we would see a pattern where Jesus preaches good news to the poor, and offers food to the hungry, and freedom for the oppressed. But the only way he can do this is by being present with the poor, the hungry, and the oppressed. You see, the temptation Jesus is faced with in the wilderness is to wield the power of a fix-it-all savior from a distance. But the power he is anointed with is a power of witness—God with us—which requires his presence. "Today the scripture is being fulfilled," Jesus says. Why? Because he is present to fulfill it.

Today, Megan, Tom, Catherine, George, Alice, Jim...you are being called to lead us during a pandemic. A wilderness time when there is no manual. A time when our circuit breakers are overloading and being a community has become exceedingly difficult. It's not an easy time to be a leader.

But please know: the same Spirit which fell upon Jesus at his baptism and led him into the wilderness, is upon you. The same Spirit which hovered over the beginning's chaos hovers over ours. The same Spirit, which anoints leaders in the stories, is anointing us in this moment.

You are being ordained during this time to help lead us, to help us grow in authentic community, to help us work toward justice. You are also being ordained to walk with these good people in their most vulnerable moments and to be in touch with your own. And, I have to mention that you are being ordained to hold meetings, and analyze budgets, and cling to grace when it feels like all you are doing is herding cats.

The same Spirit which anointed Jesus is still active, still among us, still empowering us. And don't ever forget the greatest gift we can offer as leaders is our presence. And, by the power of God's Spirit, that is enough.