

**“It Matters”**  
**Text: Luke 4:16-22**  
**The Reverend Christopher A. Henry**  
**Morningside Presbyterian Church**  
**Atlanta, GA**  
**December 5, 2010**

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me...” Luke 14:18a*

The very first non-youth-Sunday sermon that I ever preached was delivered to a congregation that had formed my Christian faith as a child and youth. Vandalia Presbyterian Church (in Greensboro, North Carolina) was a second family to me, and when I was a freshman in college, the congregation invited me back to deliver a sermon during the interim period between my father’s departure and the new pastor’s arrival. It was a good thing that the church members knew and loved me. The sermon was terrible. Perhaps the worst sermon ever preached from that pulpit. An embarrassment of clichéd illustrations, overused metaphors, and gratuitous theological jargon. I know you will find this hard to believe, but the sermon was also too long. At the door, older women gave me hugs and assured me that God was calling me to do something. They were deliberately vague on the specifics.

Despite my self-consciousness about the quality of that sermon of nine years ago, I am glad that I kept it. It’s always good for a laugh. But more importantly, it stands as a reminder of the pervasive danger of over-explanation, of too many words. Inexperienced preachers are often guilty of cramming everything they know about the Bible, theology, and the world in general into a sermon, and I was certainly an offender. The sermon was titled “Why Religion Matters” (a weighty topic for an eighteen year old) and was essentially a theoretical argument for the necessity of faith in the contemporary culture. Religion matters, I said with professorial certainty, because of its psychological benefits, contribution to social order, and discouragement of immorality. You know, all the reasons **you** come to church!

For a bit of contrast, how about Jesus’ first sermon in the gospel of Luke? If you blinked during this morning’s scripture reading, you might have missed it. Jesus was baptized by his wild-eyed cousin John in the river Jordan, driven by the Spirit of God into the desert of trial and temptation, and then Luke tells us that he returned to the region of Galilee and began to teach in the synagogues. After baptism, after temptation, he went home to Nazareth and there he preached his first sermon. Luke, the first historian and archivist in the history of the church, preserves it for us. The scripture reading was from the prophet Isaiah, the sixty-first chapter. It is a prophetic call narrative, the story of how God anointed Isaiah to preach good news, to challenge age-old assumptions, to heal deep wounds, to announce the coming of God into the world. Jesus reads it aloud in his home church, parents and grandparents and Sunday school teachers beaming with pride, and then he closes the book, hands it to the attendant, and clears his throat to begin the first sermon of his ministry. Perhaps they thought he’d begin with a joke or cute story. But Jesus has time for introductions or pleasantries. This is no presentation; it is a revelation. There is urgency in his voice. Here is what he says: “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

That's it. That's all. The words of the prophet have come to pass here and now. End of sermon.

In amazement, the family and friends who have gathered to hear the boy preacher turn to one another. The Spirit of the Lord is upon *him*? Isn't that Joseph's son? By the end of the chapter, however, their amazement and confusion will turn to frustration and anger, and they will drive him out of his hometown, pushing him to the edge of a cliff. Talk about a tough crowd. The politely deflating comments I received at the door of the sanctuary nine years ago suddenly don't seem so bad! What happened? How did things turn so quickly against the homegrown preacher, the pride of Nazareth?

Luke is foggy on the details, but the rest of his gospel paints the picture well enough. Jesus calls disciples who crave power and a box seat in the kingdom of God, but who resist his commands to self-denial and cross bearing. Just when his teachings begin to attract a crowd, he speaks hard truths about inconvenient changes and radical reversals. Give away your possessions. Welcome the outcast. Blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who mourn. His absolute commitment to his vocation is unwavering, and the more passionate his actions become the more uncomfortable his followers feel. It turns out that when he read Isaiah's words, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me..." he really meant it. He lives as if his life truly matters. No platitudes or easy truths. His message is his life—love, acceptance, forgiveness, servanthood. Unpopular strategies for attracting a crowd.

In recent decades, many faith communities and leaders have sought to correct this unfortunate error on Jesus' part. They have downplayed the seriousness of the gospel and replaced it with feel-good messages designed to entice emerging generations of potential Christians. Gone is the image of the cross, an outdated and overly imposing symbol of the faith. Gone are messages of repentance and discipleship, replaced by a theology of self-congratulation and easy success. The message seems to be something like this: "Please come to church. We won't make you do anything, believe anything, or change in any way. It isn't very serious, but we think you'll enjoy it. Come and join us!" All talk and no action. All reward and no risk. Christianity-lite, custom made for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

It is tempting, in the church and in our lives, to aim for ease. To go through the motions and say the right things and do little more than show up. We do live in a time when the Christian faith has lost much of its influence, drowned out by a cacophony of other voices and immobilized by its own weakness and division. Churches suffer from low self-esteem and high anxiety about the future. What if the numbers keep dropping? What if our children leave the church behind? How can we survive another year, another decade, another generation? We'll never make it. And so we constantly reinvent ourselves in the struggle for survival, becoming whatever the culture needs us to be. Recreation center, political rally, social club, personality cult, concert venue. We've tried them all.

It seems to me that too often we have forgotten one influential piece in the life of the church: the call of our sovereign God. Our mission is not defined by the consumer needs of this or any generation, but by the call we have to proclaim and live the gospel in the world. The survival of this or any church does not rest on gimmicks or publicity campaigns but on faithfulness to the God whose grace and power cover all the earth and who calls us

to be the church for this time and place. We exist not to survive, but to serve, to worship God and not ourselves. The power on which we depend is not our own, but God's.

I love what Annie Dillard has written about the church in her book, *Teaching A Stone To Talk*: "On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. For the sleeping god may wake some day and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."<sup>i</sup>

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. The words of Jesus are a call to deep and faithful living. This gospel cannot be distilled to a sound-byte or captured on a billboard or reduced to sappy slogans about happiness and success. There is weightiness to the faith we proclaim that demands more than one hour a week or a prayer in rush hour traffic. If the Spirit of the Lord is upon us, then our lives will bear witness to its power. The time has come for the church of Jesus Christ to put aside divisive platitudes and smug self-righteousness and live out what we proclaim and profess, to choose a theology of depth and profundity in place of the simplistic messages that aim only for ease. The time has come for Christians to recapture the richness of our faith and the significance of its claim on our lives. We are different because we are Christians. It matters. This is what the next generation is waiting to hear. Not that faith is easy, but that it is important.

When Jesus stood and read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me," it was a call and command. This is important. Much more than a sanctimonious reflection meant to please the hometown crowd, the sermon Jesus preached set the world on notice. Something big is happening here. The sacred is meeting the secular and shining new light of meaning into its darkness. The faithful are being called out of their sanctuaries of safety and into a world in need of hope. God is doing a new thing.

When I came to you in the spring of 2005, this was my immediate impression. God is doing something new, and something big here. I was captivated by the sermons of Joanna Adams that communicated with passion the substance of our faith. Her words enlivened my spirit, and in this sanctuary I had the sense that a resurrection was on the horizon. Still, I had no idea what kind of change was in store for this community and how profoundly it would impact my ministry and my life. I did not know that I would be mentored by the one whose preaching I admired. I did not know that I would be blessed to serve this congregation for five and a half years and in five different capacities. I did not know that your mission would come to define my own, that your generosity would inspire and challenge me, that your vision would call me to deeper faith and discipleship, that deep friendships would be grown and nurtured here. That, as we grew up together, you would be a part of my life every step of the way, a source of encouragement and love. You have been my teachers in the art of the Christian life.

On this, my final Sunday as your pastor, there are so many things I want to say to you. So much gratitude as I look out over a congregation so filled with the Spirit of God that you shimmer and shine. There is much that I want to say and more than I could ever say. But please hear this. Your witness, your ministry, your mission, it all matters. It matters, Walter,

that for twenty years you and this choir have brought excellence to the worship of God. It matters that this congregation's worship has led so many to a place of deep peace, joy, and challenge. It matters that you have committed yourselves to a vibrant ministry to children and burgeoning youth. It matters that you care for one another in such precious ways, and that your commitment to the other does not stop at the doors of the sanctuary or the borders of this nation. It matters that your doors are open to all who wish to worship and serve God. It matters that you pray, that you serve, that you care. What happens here at Morningside matters to all of us, to those we serve, to the world, and to God. Your ministry is more significant and long lasting than you will ever know. It will certainly be with me for a lifetime.

What you have done, what you will do, who you are by God's grace and mercy, the message you have for a weary and wayward world. It matters. In the great mystery of God's providential will for the world, your individual lives, and the life of this congregation have boundless significance. The Spirit of the Lord is upon you, Morningside. I have experienced its stirring, life-giving, life-changing presence in this place and in your lives. And I am grateful, so deeply grateful, to have been a witness. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 40-41.