



THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

CANADIAN MEMORIAL CHURCH  
& CENTRE FOR PEACE

Preached by Rev. Bruce Sanguin

Luke 4: 16-31

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January 31, 2010

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

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## “Assisted Migration”

For a long time, I've thought that this passage from Luke's gospel represents Jesus' mission statement. Here's the scene: it's his turn to be the lay reader at the worship service. The text for the morning is the prophet Isaiah. He stands before his friends and family and the good people of his local village and delivers the reading. You can imagine his parents being proud of the way he read. There is general agreement that he reads with understanding. A few even think that someday he might even make a good local rabbi.

But nobody was prepared for what came next. It wasn't a long and eloquent sermon. It was a *one-liner* that ultimately led to so much consternation in the congregation. Jesus finished the reading, rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant. Then he sat down. Are you picking up the drama here? All the eyes of the synagogue were on him. Then he delivered the shortest sermon on record.

“ Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21).

Because I'm not nearly the preacher that Jesus was, my sermon will take a little longer to flesh out!

The back-story to this event is that Jesus has just come back from 40 days in the wilderness, going 12 rounds with his inner demons. He was sorting out the voices in his head that came from his small self from the voice of Spirit. Was he in this for the power, fame and the money? Or was his life about something else? After forty days and forty nights of discernment, Jesus' small self had given way to a much-expanded Self. He had discovered and consented to his deep purpose.

So by the time he stands up to deliver Isaiah's words:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...”, well, the Spirit of the Lord actually *was* upon him. The reason people were so moved by the reading is that the familiar words carried Spirit's power.

Effectively, Jesus was announcing that he was the living embodiment of Isaiah's vision. He was so identified with his higher spiritual calling that when people heard him read the words they knew that what was happening is that Jesus was saying: “This is happening through me. I've been anointed to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, the recovery of sight to the

blind, and to let the oppressed go free.”

I'm less interested this morning in the *what* of Jesus calling as I am in his willingness to own it so deeply that everybody who heard him read these words knew that he was stepping up and saying: This is what my life is for.

There are a couple of ways we can allow this story to impact us. We can hear it and think that Jesus must have been a pretty amazing guy – so much conviction, such an exceptional human being. In fact, he's so amazing that we should maybe worship Jesus or if we're more progressive, at least admire his leadership capacity. He's so exceptional that we should put him on a pedestal – way up there beyond the rest of us. (But wait just a minute, isn't that the life that the devil offered him out in the desert? Isn't that what Jesus rejected?)

I wonder what it means that while Jesus rejected that offer, Christian churches all across the world do it anyway. I wonder if this is what Jesus would want. I wonder how putting Jesus up on a pedestal let's us off the hook. I wonder if Jesus wouldn't be telling us to do our own time in the wilderness until we emerged with a clear sense of our larger identity and calling. I wonder if he might encourage us to complete that sentence from Isaiah for ourselves:

“The Spirit of God is upon me...because Spirit has anointed me to...” What? I suspect he would trade

all the veneration he's received throughout the ages to know that those who hear this story go beyond admiration and reverence to actually answer that question for ourselves.

Julia Butterfly Hill, who spoke at Canadian Memorial almost 10 years ago, now has started an organization called What's Your Tree? You will remember that she spent 738 consecutive days and nights living in an old growth Redwood tree, that she named Luna, to prevent it from being cut down by the Pacific Lumber Company. How on earth do you spend two years living in a tree, and NEVER come down? Well, using Isaiah's language, “The Spirit of the Lord” was upon her. Julia might rather say, “The Spirit of the Redwood forest was upon her”. Frankly, the language is not nearly as important as finding what it is that is going to elevate you beyond the mere impulse to survive. This is a healthy impulse, don't get me wrong. It has served the evolution of the universe well.

But there is something undignified about human beings in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially in the affluent nations of the world, still organizing our lives around survival – still living as though we'll never have enough, still living to fulfill our personal pleasures, still defending ourselves against every other person as though they represent a threat to our survival, still thinking that money is the key to the meaning of life. Well, Jesus went to the desert without any food, and realized he could trust the universe to provide; he went without any money, and realized

that there is a distinction between money and true wealth; he went without any fame or social status, and realized that his soul had lost interest in that game. He found his tree.

Now, please don't think that I'm saying that we all have to do something as dramatic as live in a redwood tree or get ourselves crucified for a cause. This business of identifying the deep purposes of our lives is a lifelong project, and it evolves over time. I could go back over my life and identify decade by decade what I thought my life was for. It seems to me that it evolves. At one time, my deep purpose was to be as good an athlete as I could be at whatever sport I was playing. Then it was to find the meaning of life. This evolved into helping others discover their meaning in life (and during this period it looked a lot like Jesus!). Then my tree became integrating Christianity with the Great Evolving Story of the universe. Now, it is to help to reinvent Christianity by bringing an evolutionary paradigm to bear on the Christian tradition. None of these declarations of my tree were lost with the emergence of the next; rather each formed the foundation for the next iteration.

And in each case, it was less a matter of sitting down and asking myself: "Ok, what will the Spirit of God be upon me to do in this decade"; it was more about following my deep allurements, and discovering that this is what my life is for right now.

It is this wrestling to discover and declare as best we can at any given

moment in time that is a central feature of the spiritual life.

I don't believe that there is a one-size-fits-all answer to this question. For some, the Spirit is upon them to be the most loving parent or partner they can be. Another person might feel called to be the most creative entrepreneur they can imagine – and to use their wealth to change the world in some way. One way to discover it for yourself is to take an honest look at your life as it exists right now, and ask yourself where your fire is. What makes your heart burn with passion? Then find a way to do it with all your heart and soul and mind. And don't judge it – as though your passion somehow doesn't measure up to a good-enough passion.

I received an email from a friend the other day. We had a cup of tea together the day before and I was complaining about how busy I was. He managed to keep from yawning. Then the next day he sent me a one-line email. "Know your business". It was an invitation to reorient myself around my deep calling. I suspect that if we're always complaining of being too busy, it's because we're distracted by stuff that isn't any of our business.

This is one of the rewards of this spiritual practice of finishing the sentence: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to..." It helps you to know what is none of your business. Sticking our noses into other people's business will exact the reprimand, "that's none of your business". Knowing what your life is for enables you to be

curious about other people's business, but to leave it to them to take care of it, and to get on with what is your own business. It gets you back to business by saving you from busyness.

What about CMUC? We have a collective vision to teach and practice evolutionary Christian spirituality. But didn't I just say that there is no one-size-fits-all-purpose? It still holds. All we're saying is that this is our business, and because it's "evolutionary" Christian spirituality, there is an implicit recognition that we're all at different places. We're all lit up by different things. We are committed to creating a habitat of creative emergence, in which everybody finds the help and the space they need to identify and live out their deep purpose. What we're saying is that we share a common cause in making Canadian Memorial *that* kind of church where we evolve individually – together – if you know what I mean.

I was talking to Connie Barlow, a renowned evolutionary biologist. She told me about her involvement in a grassroots movement of lay horticulturalists. They look for species of trees and plants that are at risk in their native bioregion because of climate change, and then they transplant them in different regions that are more supportive of their

growth. This is something that happens naturally in evolution, but it takes vast periods of time. But with humans acting on their behalf it can be done in weeks. They call it "*assisted migration*".

I heard that and thought to myself, that's a perfect description of our task as a community that teaches and practices evolutionary Christian spirituality. That's our tree at CMUC – assisted migration. We assist the migrations of souls who aren't necessarily thriving – because the region we're all planted is a culture whose job it is to trick us into believing that we're nothing but a collection of small self consumers – and we welcome them to put their roots down in another kind of soil, another spiritual bioregion, more conducive to the evolution of the big Self. We assist their migration to more all-encompassing regions of consciousness so that they can see the true significance and purpose of their life.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us to assist the migration of willing souls into landscapes and regions of the Spirit, so that they can discover the divine with them and make a difference in the world out of that deep identity. Now who wouldn't want to be part of that movement?