St. Aidan’s Episcopal Church

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 12: 12:31a

Luke 4:14-21

Call to Mission

Some of us can remember when the best-selling book in American culture having to do with how to better oneself in business or how improve one’s quality of life at any level, was Norman Vincent Peale’s *“The Power of Positive Thinking.”[[1]](#footnote-1)* It was on the best seller list for decades, bought by religious and secular alike, in search of how to achieve a more optimistic view of life. It was not as popular with religious academics or health experts, but the general population went for it. It was published in 70 years ago and stood pretty much alone as a self-help book for people who were searching for direction and improvement in the living of life.

Since then, there have been hundreds of books published in the self-help, or reason-for-living genre, not the least of which, 50 years later, was Rick Warren’s, “*The Purpose Driven Life.”[[2]](#footnote-2)*  Warren is founder and until his retirement last year, was senior pastor of Saddleback Church, in California, the largest mega church in the U. S. It is, without a doubt, a Christian book, filled with scriptural citations throughout, yet written for everyone. Each in their own time and each in their way, his words and the words of scripture spoke to the heart of the people. People wanted to know, and still want to have answers to questions which lurk just beneath human consciousness, no matter who we are, whether millionaire or on the streets. Who am I? Why am I here? What is my purpose? What is my mission?

Some of us are fortunate in that our gifts are easily recognizable from a young age. Perhaps we are noticeably musical or artistic in other ways. Perhaps a particular sport captured us in such a way, that we couldn’t leave it alone and it became our life. These calls to a way of life are easy to identify, but most are left to figure it out somehow. What is my gift, what is myr purpose for living in this world? So we go through our days, doing our work in the best way we can with what is demanded of us, with nothing extraordinarily noticeable about ourselves to us or anyone else.

There was nothing particularly extraordinary about Jesus coming the synagogue after he arrived back in his home town of Nazareth. But the ordinary turned into the extraordinary when Jesus volunteered to read from a particular section of the Torah written by the Prophet Isaiah. Just as we do in our tradition, in the synagogue readers were selected to read prior to the beginning of worship. However, on this day, to the amazement of all present, Jesus steps up and volunteers to read. He reads what he intends to read, presents the scriptures in the way he wants to present them, and what he has to say about his purpose for reading the passage, provides the breaking open moment of what is to be his ministry, and it’s purpose. And, it is at this new beginning, this turning point in Jesus’ life that he acknowledges the presence of the Holy Spirit in his life and ministry from the very beginning of his life and, as we know, beyond his life on earth.

At his Baptism, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove. Through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Jesus was led into the wilderness for a time to sort priorities and to reject temptations to leave his path, and now, surrounded by astonished elders, family and friends,in his own hometown, Jesus is filled by the Holy Spirit, and given powerful insight into what his ministry is to be, how it is be to carried out and what its ultimate purpose will be.

He reads the words of the Prophet Isaiah, a prophetic text that is a reflection of his earthly mission and purpose. He is the Messiah.

Guided and filled by the Holy Spirit, Jesus is called to minister to the poor, the neglected, the marginalized and to set the captives freel….free from whatever it is that binds them, to bring sight to eyes that have lost the ability to see. To bring light into darkness, wherever it is found. In short, to be the Light to enlighten the nations, and all to the glory of God.

What a mission! What a purpose! It is, for Jesus, and for the Holy Spirit, a defining moment. It was a new beginning, a new Covenant, and the stirrings of what would become a new Church.

Not Church as we know it today. No buildings or budget, no Vestry or Annual Meeting, and only a handful of assorted locals, a few fishermen and a tax collector who saw, heard and believed. What they had was the Holy Spirit, and it was the Spirit that gave them the strength and courage to proclaim the Good News and to do the work they were called to do.

In a way we can relate to that moment, today. Here we all are. We have our church and our grounds, and next week we’ll have our Annual Meeting, but yet, due to the ongong pandemic, we don’t. And it is due to COVID that we are not all present today. We are called, however, by the Holy Spirit to join together through other means in order to love and support each other in the name of Christ.

Yet, whether we meet in person, as we know we will at some point, and soon, we pray, or via this live-stream, or via some other technological means, we are Church. The question that Jesus would ask us now, today, is how much power of the Holy Spirit do we really have? Jesus found himself having to introduce the Holy Spirit into his ministry from his first words to the people in the synagogue at Nazareth, “Today,” not next week, or next year, “this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

How do we know if the Holy Spirit is alive and working through us, wherever we are sitting in this moment, or wherever and however, our church is navigating its mission and purpose through a world of increasing secularism?

Perhaps the Holy Spirit is guiding us in this very moment, asking us to consider at our Annual Meeting next Sunday, a question that is fundamental to the ministry Jesus is expecting of us. The question isn’t “How are we doing as Church,” Rather, the questions is “What are we doing for God, as a Church?” “How does St. Aidan’s impact the world of the needy and oppressed?” “ Who are the captives we are called to set free.”

Perhaps in order for us to begin to answer these questions, we must each ask ourselves the same questions as they relate to us personally. “What is it that God is asking of me in this church to which I have been called?” “What is it that God is asking me to do that will make a difference even to one of the least of these in this world?”

When we understand our personal mission, we are able to come together as Church, allowing the Holy Spirit to guide us toward a mission that is as relevant today, as was Jesus’ mission in his own time.

When we are drawn to common mission by the power of the Spirit in the name of Jesus Christ, we find ourselves suddenly brought alive in the vitality of God’s purpose in Creation. We become co-Creators with God, drawn by God into God’s love and compassion, drawn by God to offer that love and compassion to the world.

It is when we forget our purpose as Church, and when we lose sight of our core mission, that the very life of a church becomes lost in the noise of the world.

It is something for us to ponder in the days ahead prior to our time for our meeting on Zoom next week, as we consider the state of our church, its purpose and its mission. What is it we must reach toward? What is it we are to accomplish? What is it that the Holy Spirit will give us to do in the name of Christ and when are we to do it?

When Jesus read his chosen passage from Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth, he must have felt raging excitement throughout his whole being, urging him to now continue what he had started, to move forward without fear, abandoning himself completely to his purpose and the mission now begun.

“Today,” said Jesus, “Today, this scriptures has been fulfilled in your hearing.” In other words, “We’re off!”

What if today were our first day of a renewed purpose and mission, in the life of the church and in our own lives. What would it look like? What would we do with it? What if it were the last day for us to fulfill our mission, our last chance. What would we do with it? If this were our only day, how deeply could we listen to God’s call to us and how quickly would we be moved to action.

The Holy Spirit has its own role to play in its guidance of this church as it did for Jesus, of Jesus. The Spirit taught Jesus that the real purpose of living was to turn away from all that misguides and tempts us away from God’s loving intent for all God’s people and to turn away from personal glory in whatever way it presents itself, whether in simple conversation or through exploiting positions of leadership.

Jesus, now filled with the Holy Spirit, in front of God and all the people present around him that day, said yes, to all that God desires for God’s people, and yes to working to alleviate the poor, to heal the sick, to free the oppressed and captives. The Spirit is leading us to turn away from manipulating God to do what we want God to do for us, and to embrace our opportunity to work for God with love, compassion and grace.

The presence of the Holy Spirit palpable and we, in this church, have known and felt that presence in many a moment. Even though we are apart, I feel the presence of the Spirit upon us all now, even as we view each other from afar. We may not be physically all present, but we are able, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to make it known to all who normally gather here, that on this day, rather than feel defeated by this pandemic, we we can create a new beginning of our own. God is showing us, even today, via this live stream, that we can create new ways to make our purpose and our mission known.

Just as Jesus began his ministry, in the power of the Holy Spirit, so do we.

Just as Jesus relied on the Holy Spirit for guidance, so shall we.

Just as Jesus founded his ministry on love, mercy, compassion and grace, so we must.

Being Church has less to do with function for ourselves and all to do with our relationship in Christ. We share life as community, no matter whether we are personally present or not. We are to exist as a visible expression of God’s purpose, because God’s purpose is our purpose. We are to exist as a visible expression of God’s love that delights in each one God calls beloved, which encompasses all that God has created. As part of the body of Christ, we hold strong together as a community of welcoming love as Church; a body of caring people, doing the work of God in the world.

When Jesus made his pronouncement in the synagogue, all were amazed, and now we are called to say the same words to a hurting world, “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” May each one of us, and may we, as the Church, as the body of Christ, be the source of comfort, of healing grace, compassion, and of love and may our purpose and mission in the world be led forward only by these and none other.

Amen.

Written to the Glory of God

E. J. R. Culver+

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1. Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking: A Practical Guide to Mastering the Problems of Everyday Living,* (Prentice Hall, US, 1952) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life (*Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)