

Texts: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21

From Psalm 19: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

Words. Our lives are full of them. Some words are more important than others. Think of the words you used to invite someone special on a first date. Or the words you used to sooth a crying child. Or the words you used to ask forgiveness.

If you could choose the words that might communicate the essence of who you are, the point of your life and your commitments, what would they be? What sums you up? What are you willing to reveal about yourself, to your friends, to the world? Students in business schools learn to give an elevator speech, a brief, 30-second introduction that sums up and defines who they are. Here in Luke's gospel, is what we could think of as Jesus' elevator speech. Here, in a few short verses, he says who he is and why he is here.

Or maybe it's easier to think of what Jesus says as his campaign speech. This year's presidential election is already underway and each of the candidates has some kind of tag line. Whether it is positive or negative, each of the candidates is working hard to express his or her priorities and vision for what this country could be. We could imagine Jesus's words in this way as well. A blueprint for his ministry.

This morning I want to concentrate on one detail of this gospel reading. Luke tells us that Jesus was filled with the power of the Holy Spirit when he spoke. It's worth stopping for a moment to take a look at what has happened in Luke's story right before this scene takes place. Today's reading comes from chapter 4. In the middle of chapter 3, Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, and we see the heavens open up and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descend on him. Then at the beginning of chapter 4, Jesus

spends 40 days in the desert, and Luke tells us that during that time he was filled with the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit which gives him the strength to endure 40 days of fasting. It is the Spirit which gives him the strength to withstand those temptations by the devil. And it is the same Spirit that brings him back to Galilee, back to his hometown of Nazareth, to the synagogue where he grew up and received his education. It is the Spirit that empowers Jesus to read these words of the prophet Isaiah and then to tell those who are gathered that his is the one who fulfills the prophecy. It is the Spirit that anoints Jesus to do this work, to accomplish God's mission. A mission to the poor and the captive, to the blind and to the oppressed. Jesus calls for release and healing, for freedom from oppression, for forgiveness from debts. "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," he says. This is not a five-year plan, with charts and graphs and strategic objectives. This is short and to the point. This is what Jesus' work is to be, today. This is who we, his disciples, are called to follow. This is his elevator speech.

The early church, that fledgling Christian movement, had no buildings, no budget, no paid staff and very few members. But what they did have was a palpable sense of the Holy Spirit working in and through them. 2,000 years later, this congregation has a building and a budget. You have called a pastor with a fancy seminary education to lead you. You pay a secretary to keep track of membership and to print bulletins and newsletters. We are part of a cluster, a synod, a denomination, an institution. How can we know that we, too, have the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through us?

What did those early Christians – say the congregation of Corinth – do? They gathered together to worship and praise God. They read the scriptures and listened as different people explained the sense. They shared a meal and sent food home to those who

couldn't be there. They prayed for and cared for each other. Sound familiar? That's what we do, too. It's through the power of the Holy Spirit that we do all that.

St. Paul wrote to that Corinthian congregation to remind them that the Spirit is at work. His words continue to speak to us today. The Spirit works in different ways in different individuals. Paul used the metaphor of the human body to make his point.

Our bodies contain 206 bones, 639 muscles and about 6 pounds of skin. Not to mention the organs, the glands, the ligaments, the nerves and the blood vessels. Every time we take a breath, every time we reach out to pick up something, every time we hear a sound or speak a word, hundreds of different parts of our bodies work together.

Paul wasn't the first ancient writer to use the body metaphor. It had been used before, but with one important difference. It had been used to remind people of their place. If you were on the bottom of the social scale, in other words, if you were a foot, your place was in the mud and dirt and crap. Don't try to be something you are not. Don't get above your raisin', as they would say in the South. If you are an eye, then you are placed above the foot. You are better than the foot, and don't you forget it. And don't you let the foot forget it either. You were made to stay in your place.

Paul switches this around. Paul writes that every part of the body needs all the other parts. There is no place in the body – that's the body of Christ – for one part to reject another. There is no place for one part to claim superiority over another. There is no place for one part to think they are not good enough. Whenever one part suffers, all suffer together. Whenever one part rejoices, all rejoice together.

And what is it that brings us together as the body of Christ? I've already given you the answer to this question. The Holy Spirit. The same Holy Spirit that descended on

Jesus at his baptism descended on you at your baptism. The same Holy Spirit that gave Jesus the strength to withstand temptation gives you the strength to make it through the tough times. The same Spirit that filled Jesus as he spoke in the synagogue in Nazareth, defining his mission to bring good news, and to release and heal and forgive – that same Spirit enables you to speak God’s good news to your neighbors, your friends, and your family. That same Spirit enables you to do God’s work, whether it’s raking leaves or baking cupcakes or driving someone to a doctor’s appointment. That same Holy Spirit that blew through the upper room on the Day of Pentecost and gathered people of different languages and cultures together to become the church – that same Holy Spirit blows through this room here today. That same Spirit that gathered a group of believers 65 years ago to form Immanuel Lutheran Church – that same Spirit continues to gather us today. You can’t be a Christian by yourself. The gift of the Holy Spirit is the gift of belonging to the body of Christ.

The Holy Spirit gives us something to *be* for God – we are his body, here in Chadron, here in the Panhandle, here in Nebraska, here in the United States, here in North America, here on this precious and beautiful earth that we call home. The Holy Spirit gives us something to *do* for God – that is our mission. To use our gifts to do the work that God calls us to do here. The Annual Report you received in the mail this week is full of words. Words that describe a lot of what we’ve done in the past year as the body of Christ. We are going to take some time in a few minutes to remember and celebrate all of that and plan for the year ahead. And then we are going to leave this sanctuary and go back to our homes and workplaces and schools, and we are going to do God’s work.

This is what our Lord Jesus defined as his mission, his blueprint for ministry:

“To bring good news to the poor; to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

We know what our mission is because we follow him. Filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, we are Jesus’ hands and feet and mouth and eyes and ears and backs and shoulders. It’s God’s work. And we are called to do it.

Today this Scripture is being fulfilled. Here. Now. By us, and by the church everywhere. Let’s get to work.

Amen.