Sunday, January 25, 2004
**THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD**
Luke 4:14-21

According to the story in Luke's gospel, after Jesus was baptized and had an experience of heaven being opened and God's Spirit descending on him like a dove, he first went into the desert for 40 days. When he returned from this spiritual retreat, he began his public ministry by preaching a sermon in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. He took as the text for his sermon several verses from the prophet Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me 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."

He applied it to himself. He said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." As you might expect, some of those in the synagogue were impressed by Jesus and others were not. There were those who had seen him grow up in Nazareth and could only think of him as the son of Joseph and Mary. They were not convinced that God's Spirit was upon him. Where was the evidence? If God's Spirit was on him, how could they also experience God's Spirit?

Today, those who seek to follow the way of Jesus have an advantage. You are aware of the influence he has had. You know the story of the penniless rabbi from a backwater town, who wrote nothing, lived a very brief life, and died as a criminal on a cross. And yet, this man transformed his disappointed disciples into martyrs and started a spiritual reformation that is still shaking the foundations of what people believe about God, human life, and our responsibilities to and for one another.

To fully appreciate Jesus and the power of God's Spirit upon him, it requires a careful examination of his effect on the people around him, and then his effect on human history. He not only affected those in his lifetime; he continues to affect more people in more places, with more power than any human being who has ever lived.

I am convinced that the best way to continue to grow in your understanding of Jesus and the power of God's Spirit is to explore what is meant by "The Spirit of the Lord." Jesus was a "Spirit" person.

It's helpful to know that "Spirit," or some variation of this word, is a key component of every religious tradition in history. It is that word that describes what is beyond your ability to fully grasp or explain, but whose undeniable presence you feel or want to feel. It is the longing in you for "something more." It is your built-in yearning for God.

In the Hebrew world in which Jesus lived, there were two different ways of talking about the Spirit of God. One was a more impersonal, uncontrollable, and mysterious force, which in Hebrew means wind or breath of God. The other was more personal. It is the "breath of life" in you, breathed into you by the Spirit of God.

The Apostle Paul, the first person known to have written about Jesus, speaks of him as coming "in power and in the Holy Spirit." He goes on to caution believers to be careful lest they "quench the Spirit."

I am convinced that the main purpose of the sermon which Jesus preached to his hometown congregation in the synagogue in Nazareth was to give guidance on how they could more powerfully experience the Spirit of the Lord that he had experienced.

This sermon is addressed to you who believe in God but seldom, if ever, have felt as much of the presence of God's Spirit in your life as you would like. Or maybe you have experienced it, but you were not aware of it.

If you believe in God's Spirit, which is in you and all around you, but you have never felt it, then you could be like people who believe in music; they know that music is made, they hear it, but are never moved or inspired by it.

Or you could be like people who believe that the earth goes around the sun. You have been told that it does, told by people who are supposed to know, and in whose authority you trust, but in your daily experience, it doesn't look as if the earth is going around the sun. You never feel the cosmic motion in your bones. You don't feel as if the ground you are standing on is moving.

What then can you learn from Jesus about how to more fully experience the Spirit of God in your life?

First, you will not experience the presence of God's Spirit in the same way that you experience the physical presence of another person. That's because the Spirit of God is invisible, inaudible, and intangible. You are not a stranger to this idea. If you have ever been on a ship and crossed the equator, that invisible line that goes around the earth, you did not see it. It's there, but it's not there. It's a way of understanding and talking about planet Earth.

Similarly, love is invisible, but you can see love in action. You can see the results of love. Although I am far behind in my understanding of modern theoretical physics, I'm told that no one can see the tiniest charges of energy which make up all matter.

Most human beings are said to have five senses — hearing, sight, smell, taste, and touch — five gateways to the material world around you. People who lose one or two of their senses make up for them by increasing the sensitivity of the others. But no one would want to give up any one of their five senses if they could help it. These are doorways through which you experience the world around you.

There is also a "sixth sense" by which you perceive the immaterial world. You go into a house, and everything is normal, all things are in order, but you sense something is wrong; there is trouble somewhere; something has happened that has upset the family.

In the same way, you do not see God's Spirit; you sense it. However, the fascinating thing is this: when you sense it, you talk about it as though you had seen it or heard it or touched it. That's because there isn't any other way of talking about it. So when Jesus sensed the Spirit of God in his life when he was baptized, he described it as being like a dove which descended on him. It's not always a bad feeling or upsetting. It's sometimes an awesome feeling or inspiring. People have told me that they have walked into this church building and felt the presence of God's Spirit without speaking to anyone.

Jesus said to the people in the synagogue in Nazareth, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me." How did he know? Because this Spirit had given him an assignment to "preach good news to

the poor; to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to let the oppressed go free."

Second, when it comes to sensing the Spirit of God, a great deal depends on the kind of person you are. Some are more sensitive than others. That's true in every area of life. Some people are more sensitive with sight. They see details that you do not see. Others have more acute hearing; still others a more powerful sense of smell or touch.

This difference in sensitivity is even more noticeable when you come to the area of spiritual things, invisible things. Some people are more sensitive than others to people. You've met individuals who seem to be completely insensitive to what others are feeling.

It's fair to say that some have an eye for beauty, some have an ear for music, and some are more aware of spiritual realities. They have a stronger feeling for God's Spirit. However, because you are created in God's image, I am convinced that there is no human being totally incapable of experiencing God's Spirit. No one is totally immune to the Divine.

At the same time, remember there are no two people exactly alike in the way they sense God's Spirit. There are people who seem to be most sensitive to God's Spirit in silence. Others need music. Still others need certain rituals such as Holy Communion. I am more likely to sense the Spirit of God in a building like this than in a gymnasium or while driving on the interstate.

When I have stood by the bedside of someone who is dying and I am holding his or her hand, I have had a strong sense of the presence of God's Spirit.

Third, you will sometimes be aware of the presence of God's loving Spirit in unexpected ways. In last week's sermon on turning water into wine, I told the story of a woman I know who experienced the presence of God's Spirit when her hospital roommate's husband gently washed her tear-streaked face. You can often be aware of God's loving Spirit when you are giving or receiving acts of compassion. So if you truly want to experience God's Spirit, live a life filled with compassion.

Fourth, remember this: God's loving Spirit is active all the time in creation and in your life and mine, whether you are aware of it or not. That was the revolutionary idea that Jesus wanted the people of his day to know and wants you to know. You can never completely escape from the Spirit. As the story of Jonah reminds you, you can run from God's Spirit, but you cannot hide.

Years before Jesus, the Psalmist wrote: "Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?"

What Jesus did was to give a new understanding of God's Spirit and how it is at work in you and in the world at large. He taught that there is more to life than just obeying religious rules and following rituals, important as that can be. He called people to walk by the Spirit, to be compassionate as God is compassionate.

Not everyone accepted this idea. Some people looked at Jesus and walked away. Others looked at him and saw the face of God, the essence of God, which is love — this was the essence of Jesus. For many, this Holy One, previously thought to be mostly inaccessible, remote, or impossible to know, was now revealed in Jesus.

He also demonstrated that the Spirit of God was active by knocking down all the barriers that human beings had built and defended through ignorance and fear. He demonstrated this by doing it in his own life.

How do you know if you are walking by and with the Spirit? How do you know if you are allowing God's Spirit to be active in your life? St. Paul wrote in one of his letters: "The fruit (or proof) of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." (Galatians 5:22)

In a church at Corinth, when there was an argument as to which members had more of God's Spirit at work in them, and some members claimed they were more spiritual than others because they could speak in tongues, Paul had to remind them, "If I speak in tongues of mortals and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol."

Dear friends, all of you can walk with the Spirit. Many or most of you are already doing it, and some might not be aware that you are. Remember this above all else: this Spirit of the Lord which is upon you opens to you the wisdom of the ages, which suggests that it is in giving that you receive, it is in forgiving that you are forgiven, it is in loving that you are loved, and ultimately, it is through dying that you find the fullness of life. Amen.