

Coral snakes and scarlet king snakes have similar color patterns: red, yellow, and black stripes. But king snakes are harmless. And coral snakes are relatives of the cobra and are extremely poisonous and lethal. Yet both of these snakes have red, yellow, and black stripes. The only difference is that the stripes come in differing orders.

So as I kid we were taught a poem to tell the snakes apart based on the order of their colored stripes:

*Red to yellow, kill a fellow,  
Red to black, friend of Jack.*

One of my friends from a different part of the country learned a different version:

*Red touch black, venom lack,  
Yellow touch red, you'll soon be dead.*

When it comes to coral snakes and king snakes, the order of the colors of the stripes makes a huge difference.

Something similar can happen in an arts and crafts project. You can give a group of people a single bucket of beads. Each person can take those beads and string them together to make a necklace. And yet, depending on the beads which each person selects, and the order in which each person strings them together, you can come up with very different necklaces made up of very similar beads.

In scripture, we have 4 Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And there is a sense in which all 4 Gospel writers are drawing from a group of similar stories. And yet, part of the artistry and part of the difference between each of these Gospels is the way each of the writers strings the beads together in a particular way to highlight certain aspects, certain themes, certain lenses through which they want us to view Jesus. Thus while each Gospel tells us about the same Jesus, each does so in a unique way, from a unique angle, with unique emphases. They may be pulling from similar buckets of beads. But they string them together in different ways.

Our parish is reading the Gospel of Luke together during Lent. And Luke highlights certain themes, he emphasizes certain aspects of who Jesus is.

Last week I mentioned Luke's theme of the great reversal. It is one of the core themes in Luke that God wants to turn things upside down so that we see things God's way instead of the way we would normally see them. Luke reminds us over and over again that things are not what they seem. Luke reminds us that the conclusions our human minds jump to are not equivalent to the way God thinks of things. This is a hugely important theme in Luke.

Today, I want to touch on two other unique themes, unique emphases in Luke. And they both are prominent in the early sections of Luke which we've been reading these first two-and-a-half weeks.

Since Ash Wednesday, we've read the first 8 chapters, the first third of Luke.

We began in chapters 1 and 2 with the stories of the announcements and the births of John the Baptist and Jesus.

Then in chapter 3 and 4 we saw Jesus preparing for his ministry, being baptized by John. Jesus then went into the wilderness where he experienced temptations. We had that story as our Gospel lesson two Sundays ago.

But then in the middle of chapter 4 in Luke, Jesus begins his ministry in a unique way.

Luke begins Jesus' ministry in chapter 4 with what basically functions as an inaugural address. And then Luke shows how Jesus takes what he says in his inaugural address in chapter 4, and carries it out in the early days of his ministry, in chapters 5 and 6 and 7 and 8.

In our culture, when a new president takes office there is often great interest in how they will begin their presidency. And that interest often focuses on two things: first the inaugural address, and second, the first 100 days of the presidency. In the inaugural address, new presidents highlight their agendas, their aspirations, their goals. But a speech without any subsequent action is simply empty rhetoric. Thus, in addition to the inaugural speech, we also pay attention to how a new president begins their presidency, what actions they take, especially in the first 100 days.

This is what's been happening in our section of Luke this past week and a half. In this part of Luke, Jesus sets out his agenda, his vision, his mission statement. But then Luke shows us how Jesus enacts that vision, how he lives out his mission.

It begins in the middle of chapter 4. Jesus visits his hometown and gives what is basically an inaugural address. He does this at a sabbath service in the synagogue there.

Jesus is invited to read from scripture, from the book of Isaiah. And he reads from the 61<sup>st</sup> chapter:

"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."<sup>1</sup>

This passage from Isaiah pointed to a prophetic figure, one on whom the Spirit of the Lord would come. This new prophet would proclaim God's great reversal: release to those in bondage, new sight for those who cannot see, good news to those who are in need.

And then Jesus sits down, and Luke says that "The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him."<sup>2</sup>

And then Jesus says something remarkable. He drops a real bombshell. He says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."<sup>3</sup>

This is an amazing claim. Jesus is saying that these words of Isaiah are not about the future. Instead, Jesus claims that they are being fulfilled in the present, that they are being

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<sup>1</sup> Lk 4:18-19

<sup>2</sup> Lk 4:20

<sup>3</sup> Lk 4:21

fulfilled in him. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Or as another translation says, "The Scripture you've just heard has been fulfilled this very day!"<sup>4</sup>

Jesus is claiming to be that great prophetic figure who will bring God's kingdom, God's great reversal. The kingdom and the power and the glory do not belong to Caesar. They belong to God.

A decade or so after Luke, the book of Revelation would say it this way: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever."<sup>5</sup>

So, Jesus begins his ministry with an amazing double claim.

1. Jesus is claiming that the Spirit of the Lord rests on him. And 2. Jesus is going to do God's work and inaugurate the coming of God's kingdom.

And such grandiose claims might be easy to dismiss, except for two other things. Luke wants to make sure we understand both of these things: things which have preceded this inaugural address, and things which follow it.

What has preceded this claim that God's Holy Spirit rests on Jesus, that Jesus is a new prophet?

Well, Luke has been laying some groundwork for us. Because in Jesus' time, the idea of God sending a prophet was something of an anachronism. In the Jewish world of Jesus' time, everyone knew that the time of the prophets was long over. The Jewish prophetic movement had ended centuries before. It was as much a part of their distant past as the idea of knights in shining armor is in our past. It was long gone.

In Jesus' world, the idea that the Holy Spirit would come and inspire new prophetic figures was WAY off the radar screen.

So Luke has been laying some groundwork for us in speaking of the Holy Spirit. In fact, Luke speaks more about the Holy Spirit than any other Gospel. And for that matter, Luke's sequel, the book of Acts, speaks even more about the Holy Spirit, about 3-times more than the Gospel of Luke does.

So in Luke and Acts, Luke wants us to know that the Holy Spirit is alive and well and active.

In Luke's Gospel, we have been told that the Holy Spirit filled John the Baptist<sup>6</sup> and both his father<sup>7</sup> and his mother.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Lk 4:21, NLT

<sup>5</sup> Rev 11:15

<sup>6</sup> Lk 1:15, 17, 80

<sup>7</sup> Lk 1:67

<sup>8</sup> Lk 1:41

The Holy Spirit came upon Mary, Jesus' mother at his conception.<sup>9</sup> And 40 days after his birth, there was a prophecy from the old man Simeon in the Temple who had been guided by the Holy Spirit to see this child.<sup>10</sup> And there was another prophetic utterance from the old woman Anna, who is described point blank with the label, "prophet."<sup>11</sup>

So Luke is telling us that the Holy Spirit is alive and well and active in the events before and after Jesus' birth, and there are a number of folks, men and women, who are inspired by the Holy Spirit to give prophetic utterances.

And Luke says that Jesus himself was filled with the Holy Spirit at his baptism.<sup>12</sup> And afterwards, Luke says, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil."<sup>13</sup>

And right after the temptations, Luke says, "Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee."<sup>14</sup> And there he stands up and says, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me..."<sup>15</sup> And Luke wants us as his readers to say, 'You'd better believe it. God is still active in his world, and is especially present in this man Jesus.'

And so to underscore this fact, Luke does a second thing. After Jesus' inaugural speech, Jesus goes out and goes into action. As we read this past week, Jesus makes explicit what he said. He brings sight to the blind. He proclaims the good news of God's kingdom. He heals those who are enslaved by evil and demonic forces. He even brings life to those who have died.

And Jesus proclaims the amazing reversal of God. He commands us to live in a different way. Love your enemies.<sup>16</sup> Do to others as you would have them do to you.<sup>17</sup> Forgive, and you will be forgiven.<sup>18</sup>

This is something new and unexpected. This is not the typical playbook for a Jewish Messiah. And as we read this week, even John the Baptist has his doubts. By this time John is sitting in prison. And he sends a couple of his followers to Jesus to double check. John had said that Jesus was the Messiah, that he was the one coming to baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.<sup>19</sup>

But I have a suspicion that John was hoping to see more of the "fire." I think John was hoping that Jesus would be kicking rear ends and taking names—opposing the Roman government, opposing the corruption in the Temple hierarchy. But Jesus has a different agenda.

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<sup>9</sup> Lk 1:35

<sup>10</sup> Lk 2:26-27

<sup>11</sup> Lk 2:36

<sup>12</sup> Lk 3:22

<sup>13</sup> Lk 4:1-2

<sup>14</sup> Lk 4:14

<sup>15</sup> Lk 4:18

<sup>16</sup> Lk 6:27

<sup>17</sup> Lk 6:31

<sup>18</sup> Lk 6:37

<sup>19</sup> Lk 3:16

Jesus is "kicking rear ends" but his stakes are quite a bit higher. Jesus is not focused on fighting the Romans. Jesus is focused on fighting the powers of darkness and disease and death itself.

And so Jesus gives this response to John's followers:

"Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them."<sup>20</sup>

In other words, Jesus is carrying out his program. Jesus is doing EXACTLY what he said in his inaugural address that he was anointed by the Holy Spirit to do.

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me... to bring good news... and release... and new sight... and new freedom.'<sup>21</sup> And even new life.

And Jesus calls us to follow in that same mission. We have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit in our Baptisms. And Jesus calls us to continue his mission. Proclaiming Good News in a world that desperately needs to hear it. Loving others in a world that is full of hatred. Forgiving others in a world where forgiveness is all too rare.

In our readings for this coming week, we will see Jesus sending out his followers to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God.

And in our broken and hurting world, Jesus still sends us out as agents of God's love.

Love others. Forgive as you have been forgiven.

Proclaim the Good News. God is near. God is here.

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<sup>20</sup> Luke 7:22

<sup>21</sup> Lk 4:18-19