

# Hard Times: The Spirit is Upon me!

Isaiah 61:1-11

Luke 4:14-30

The Spirit of the Lord is upon each of us in Christ  
Jesus.

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Has anyone ever seen the movie Preacher's Kid? The movie is the story of what the stereotypical idea of a life as a preacher's kid would be like. In the film, a preacher's daughter is tired of being a preacher's kid and longs to experience more of life. 20 something ANGIE KING strikes out on her own for the very first time and joins a traveling gospel show. In this modern-day rendition of the fable of The Prodigal Son, she soon discovers life on the road is tough but fears going home with nothing to show for herself, or worse, to a father who no longer loves her... But her father welcomes her back and Angie is forgiven.

This movie came out in 2011. I was 14, and I was just starting to put the pieces together of what my life was like compared to my friends around me. This movie displayed a very strict father figure as the pastor, and although that did not really represent my scenario, Angie and I still had a lot in common. What really drew me into this movie was first, the title, and second, the way in which Angie felt like she was born into a role of pressure at such a young age. All she wanted was to figure out her own path. My entire life I have been called a PK or a preacher's kid. I ran around churches. The nursery potty-trained me. My sister and I played church instead of school. And all the while, I felt this strange attraction and desire to know more about all this God stuff that everyone kept talking about. What was the big deal? Why did it matter? Why were their people that didn't know about God? These were some big questions for a 14 year old, however, that's how I was raised - by parents that lived out their faith day in and day out. So it wasn't much of a surprise when I finally started finding my own faith in high school.

My own calling came when I was 17. I had moved to Russellville in the 10th grade, and I was running around with a pretty crazy and careless group of friends. I was just trying to fit in and be "normal" while being the new girl. I didn't tell very many people that I was a PK. So this particular

weekend, I was basically forced to a retreat called Chrysalis kicking and screaming. I remember crying on my way there for some silly reason. But once I settled into the weekend, God showed up big time. Each speaker, every story, all of it hit me so hard. I listened, learned, cried, prayed, sang, laughed, and in this short weekend, I heard God loud and clear. There was more to life than just fitting in. I knew I was called to life in relationship with God and a service to ministry. When I got back from the retreat we went to a worship service where a man with the gift of prophecy prayed for my ministry and the boldness that God has anointed on my life. I didn't know how that would all play out. But here I am today, 23 about to embark on an extremely BOLD journey of ministry.

I'll be leaving on August 14th on a two-year journey! I have been chosen to be a US-2 Missionary for the United Methodist Church. I'll be living in Miami and St. Petersburg, Florida and serving the Southern Florida District for the Florida Conference of United Methodist Church. As a Coordinator for the Fill the Table Initiative, I'll be participating in organizing 100,000 Florida United Methodists in serving three million meals, to alleviate hunger in ways that address social justice, racial inequities, and asset-based community problem solving. All the while living through a pandemic in a hot spot.

I am extremely excited and blessed to begin this journey of services in Florida. When I think about my life's story and what I am called to do, it shouldn't come as a surprise. What I am doing, although particular and unique to me, I believe should be what all of our young people that have been raised in a church with faithful parents and families should be doing: following their calling. God's Spirit is upon each of us! Every single one of us that knows God's love is anointed! I am here to tell you that the Church raised me well! My parents raised me well. And it is all of our callings to do the same for our children and youth in this church. We must not give up on our children. We have to hold them to this higher standard, and it starts very young in families and churches that have the spirit within.

Children have a great blessing in knowing God's love. They have the Spirit of the Lord Upon Them!

It is this same spirit that we hear about in our scripture reading today. It comes from what is known as Third Isaiah. This part of the book is reflecting the conditions after the exiles return to rebuild Jerusalem. At this point, the temple in Jerusalem is still in ruins, but there is a tone of joy and hope even if it is a little bit more sober. In Isaiah 61, the prophet declares himself "anointed" by the spirit of the Lord to proclaim good news to the oppressed and marginalized in Zion and rally them to rebuild "the ancient ruins". God promises justice through Isaiah. Walter Brueggemann writes in his book, *From Judgement to Hope*, "This sustained focus on justice is expressed through inclusiveness, neighborly worship, and economic transformation. The poetry offers a vision of a new Jerusalem. This is no longer the old Jerusalem of the eighth century that failed the test of justice and righteousness." This new Jerusalem comes from what Isaiah imagines is the intended vision by God, "one that is permeated with neighborly governance and economic solidarity, supported by the attentiveness of God's own self."

This scripture in Isaiah shows up again in the Gospel of Luke when Jesus reads the first two verses of this chapter from the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue and uses them to announce the nature of his own ministry. What becomes evident is that if the scripture in Isaiah is describing the nature of God's heart and desire for all of his people, then Jesus as God's son would live out this calling as well. What really resonates with me about this passage in Luke is the way in which Luke sets up the scene. He says, "Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been raised." Jesus' first public sermon was not to strangers. These were his family and friends. He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath like he had done his entire life, but this time was different. This time he gave a sermon and read from the scroll of Isaiah. He announced his calling to "fulfill" this scripture just as they had heard it.

Jesus would fulfill this scripture by calling all of us to take part in this calling. And when I say all of us, Jesus is clear that he means all - the poor, blind, prisoned, heartbroken, foreigner, and stranger. However, Jesus goes on to say in this same story, "I assure you that no prophet is welcome in the prophet's hometown." This should seem odd as he has just made clear that he has been sent by God to proclaim Good News to everyone. One idea for the reason for this declaration of unwelcomeness is that his hearers do not want to share their privilege with outsiders. Jesus' message is intentionally focused upon the marginal members of society, the "poor," "prisoners," "blind," and "oppressed." The ones not currently present.

I want to take a minute to talk about privilege. The dictionary definition says privilege is a special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group. I think it's important to note that privilege is not chosen or gained. It is something you are just born into due to a certain circumstance. You don't get to choose the privileges that your life sets up for you. This might be the privilege of race, social class, religion, family structure, healthy relationship, educational access, learning abilities, physical abilities, social abilities, mental capacities, access to power and so on.

I started reading this story in Luke through the lens of privilege. And what I found is that Jesus' followers had several layers of privilege.

First, they had immediate access to Jesus.

Second, they had a personal relationship with Jesus.

Third, they were educated and aware of the stories and scriptures that Jesus was teaching.

Fourth, they were Jewish, Palestinian Jewish to be specific just like Jesus.

Lastly, they wanted to keep Jesus' message to themselves most likely out of fear.

I think they ultimately wanted to be close to God, and Jesus was the closest thing they knew they could get. In Luke 4: 29, we read that his hearers attempted to push him off a cliff and run him out of town. We must attempt to read this action of violence with empathy and understanding. These people were protesting Jesus and his message. They were driven by pain and fear of losing someone they loved. They want Jesus to promise them life, healing, and freedom, too. They want to keep these privileges all to themselves. Ultimately, we read that Jesus follows his calling and takes his ministry to the oppressed in other towns following what the spirit has called him to do.

What Jesus doesn't say or explain is that he had these same privileges. He was raised in these same conditions as his family and friends, yet, he believes these privileges are calling him to do something different. Jesus has been taught scripture and religious traditions. He's had access and privilege in knowing God is his father. He deeply and rightly believes to be the Son of God. The difference in Jesus and his family and friends is that instead of choosing violence and anger to keep people out, Jesus chooses peace and faith and accepts that the Spirit of the Lord is Upon him. He chooses to accept his calling and goes to tell the good news that Isaiah had announced. Through the ability to read and hear the Gospels, this same message is accessible to us as followers of Jesus Christ. We can either use our privilege to do violence and keep people out and be influenced by fear, or we can use our privilege to give new people voices and opportunities to know God.

What I have come to learn about privilege is that it's all about what we do with it. We all have a huge choice. When Isaiah says that the Spirit of the Lord is Upon Me! He is making the choice to accept his privilege and his voice to glorify the Lord. What he does with this privilege is even more important, He preaches Good News to the poor, release to the prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed! If that's not using privilege for good, then I don't know what is!

I personally have been born with a lot of privilege. I am white. I am educated. I have a perfect household - one mom and one dad, never divorced, and one sibling. I have no disabilities. I am healthy. I fit the spitting image of what a good American girl is supposed to look like, behave, and do.

However, I want to tell you about a girl named Honey. She wasn't born into a life with the same privileges as me. Her father was abusive. Her mother died early in her life. She was kicked out of her home at the age of 13. She started doing drugs to cope at 14. She sold her body to make money at 15. She had two children by the age of 17. And just a few weeks ago she lost her oldest daughter to the COVID-19 virus. She was about to turn 3.

Honey doesn't have many privileges as a poor, white-girl, living in the streets of LA. She doesn't have any access to education, no family, no friends, only gangs and drugs. However, Honey is loved. Honey has gifts and a purpose. She's just missing someone to tell her and remind her and encourage her and to love her. That's us! As followers of Jesus, it's our job to tell her! The Spirit is upon us to share with her! Because the spirit is upon her, too! This is the Good News! Good news should be life giving, it should teach skills and create opportunities. These opportunities are often taken for granted by people that have privilege and access to growth. However, if we don't teach these skills and help open doors for people like Honey, then she will never know what she is capable of achieving for herself. She will never know the power, grace, and love of God.

There is actually a term for this idea in the Non-Profit realm. It's called Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD). John McKnight and Jody Krezmann, co-founders of ABCD, proposed that when working with low-income citizens, you ought to begin by focusing on the gifts of the community rather than starting with what the community lacks. I think this idea really can apply to all types of groups, organizations, or even

churches. We have to focus on our gifts, our privilege, our location, our resources, our abilities.

Michael Mather writes the book “Having Nothing, Possessing Everything: Finding Abundant Communities in Unexpected Places.” He’s been a pastor for over thirty years serving churches in low-income and intercity communities. At one of his appointments, in South Bend, they had a food pantry, like many do. One Pentecost Sunday, they were reading from Acts 2 where Peter is preaching from the prophet Joel. Joel shares this word from God: “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.” After the service a woman said to Mather, “If what Joel said is true, why don’t we treat people like that?” She continued, “When people come to the food pantry, we ask people how poor they are rather than how rich they are. Peter is saying all people have God’s Spirit poured into them.”

This lady is so right. Just like in our scripture in Isaiah, today. The Spirit is Upon Me! The Spirit is Upon Everyone! So Mather took this question seriously, and the church began changing the way they saw the people that came to their food pantry. In order to receive food, people would have to fill out a questionnaire. Previously, they had asked people how poor they were. Now, they started asking “whether folks took care of children or elders, and whether they did it with their family or as part of a job or to help out a neighbor. They asked if people could put up drywall or fix a toaster or knew how to drive a car. They asked “Do you play a musical instrument?” “Do you garden?” “Do you grow vegetables, flowers, or both?” And finally they asked, “What three things do you know well enough that you could teach them to someone?”

One of the first people that came to the food pantry after they began using this questionnaire was a neighbor, Adele. She was working part-time at the University of Notre Dame as a cook. She said in her questionnaire that she was a good cook. So the church followed up, and they invited her to cook for the church staff one day. They provided the supplies and she did the cooking, and it was fabulous!

They continued to hire Adele for events. They created her a business card. Adele eventually grew her connections and her business so much that a year and a half later she opened her own restaurant. This is the theology of abundance! By looking for and naming the gifts and the spirit of God in people, who we usually think are poor or needy or in prison or blind or heartbroken, we begin to see as talented, gifted, unique, desirable, and needed. Jesus proclaims the Good News to the poor, by telling people they are anointed. They are needed. They are worthy and loved and gifted... This is Good News!

The amazing thing is this. You, too are needed, worthy, loved, and gifted. I'm so grateful to say that the church has been telling me these things since the day I was born. And because I know these things to be true about myself, I know that these things are true about everyone else. Every single person no matter their race, gender, sexuality, education, economic status, drug addiction, homeless or housed, hungry or full, rich or poor... "The Lord loves Justice," the love for justice can only come when we know our privileges, we set them aside, and we extend the big enough and wide enough and long enough, short or tall enough for all people to have access to these same privileges. When we do this, "Their offspring will be known among the nations, and their descendants among the people. All who see them will recognize that they are a people blessed by the Lord!" I can promise you this... God shows up in big ways! God has shown up time and time again in my journey of faith. And I believe the same to be true for each of you. The message is clear, we each have the spirit of the lord upon us! And we must use our gifts to serve the Lord each and every day! This is our calling. This is Jesus' calling, the greatest hope of all!