

A Life-Changing God

Luke 4:14-21

Ann Hatfield

I never expected to be a pastor. Growing up I really enjoyed math and science, so perhaps it isn't a surprise my undergraduate degree is in civil engineering. I do tend to be a perfectionist and overly precise, at times. I certainly have a "measure twice, cut once" mentality. Check and then double-check, just to make sure!

So, when people ask me how I went from engineering to pastoring, all I can point to is God. GOD. There really isn't any other suitable explanation. God kept showing up – again, and again, and AGAIN. And God would not take "NO" for my answer. And believe me, I tried!!

In hindsight, there is a particular, long-running experience that nudged me to seminary. Nudge is probably too gentle a word. Often it felt more like a firm push, as I considered returning to graduate school for 1. Social work, 2. Teaching, or 3. Ministry. And by "ministry" I meant hospice chaplain. Definitely not a pastor in a congregation. Nope, no way – THAT was inconceivable!!

Of course, God had other plans.

You see, during the time I wrestled with God about going to seminary, I was also in a weekly Bible Study. For over a dozen years, I met with a small group to study Scripture together. It was a formative time for me, as God used members of that group and Scripture to continue teaching me about Jesus. And God refused to stop speaking into my life through the Holy Spirit.

Scripture is amazing! Whether we encounter it in a Bible Study or in worship, the written word of God is living and active. These ancient, biblical texts have the capacity to speak into our lives today – thousands of years after the passages were written! When we explore the Bible in community – as we do every Sunday in worship – Scripture has the ability by the power of God's Spirit to be a life-changing experience for us TODAY! Here and now.

Do you ever wonder if Jesus thought about simply remaining a carpenter? It is clear Scripture and the Holy Spirit formed him, too.

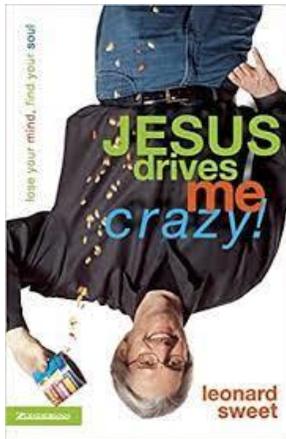
This passage from Luke's gospel takes place in the synagogue, as the Jewish community gathers for worship. Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth filled with the power of the Spirit. On this particular Sabbath, Jesus unrolls the scroll and reads from the Prophet Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Essentially, these were the formative words of Jesus’ life, ministry, and purpose. They are – if you will – the Messiah’s mission statement.

Back when I thought engineering was **my mission** in life, my college roommate Elaine and I shared many of the same courses and textbooks. Elaine’s father, a professor at Syracuse University, asked us, “Which book are you using for Physics this semester?” To which we responded, “The thick, green one.”

He tried again: “Well, what book are you studying for Calculus?” “The big, white one.” Elaine’s father was horrified!! You need to know more than the size and color of your college textbooks! Pay attention to the authors, editors, and publishing dates!



His admonishment stuck with me...at least to some extent. While writing this sermon, a book came to mind. What popped into my head was an image: “Upside-down man.” Eventually, I recalled the author: Leonard Sweet. The book *Jesus Drives Me Crazy!* looks like this:

It IS an eye-catching and memorable cover!

While wrestling with God, and firmly entrenched in my “I’m-not-going-to-seminary” mindset, there were definitely times I felt like screaming, “**Jesus drives me crazy!**” The growing sense of a call to full-time ministry was turning my organized, precise, engineering world upside-down.

In *Jesus Drives Me Crazy!* Leonard Sweet describes two, distinct ways of making sense of the world. One is the normal way. The other is the NUTS way, where NUTS (N-U-T-S) is an acronym for “Never Underestimate the Spirit.” N-U-T-S.

The normal way is remaining an engineer. The NUTS way is leaving all the engineering textbooks behind to study NEW books in seminary.

The normal way is an established congregation remaining in the borough of West Chester, where it had been for 100 years. The NUTS way is relocating outside of town to Rt. 202 and constructing a new building, requiring multiple capital campaigns to fund this beautiful church facility.

Sure, some people will say, “That’s insane!” Our response? “Yes, it might seem crazy, but NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE SPIRIT!”

The Holy Spirit breathes life into everything. Through the power of the Spirit, God is always at work – creating, sustaining, and redeeming the world – reconciling ALL things in Christ. The Spirit has the ability to shape and guide – to comfort and counsel – to nudge and transform.

This past Tuesday, our Session and Board of Deacons gathered on Zoom for an annual joint meeting. During our time together, the incoming ruling elders and deacons shared their faith statements. Throughout my years at Westminster, I have heard many incoming officers describe their Christian beliefs, love of Jesus, and unique experiences of God.

I'm not sure I can convey what a HOLY PRIVILEGE it is to hear these faith journeys. No two statements are alike, as people share their encounters with God's life-changing Spirit. Some stories are sprinkled with laughter; many are told through tears. All of us privileged to hear them are deeply moved. It is a reminder that God's amazing grace permeates all of life, and has the capacity to hold both our joys and our sorrows.

Jesus' faith journey, as described in Luke's gospel, becomes even more riveting. (Others might say inconceivable, but we'll stick with riveting.) When Jesus finishes reading, he hands the scroll back and sits down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue are fixed on Jesus, who says, *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

Jesus uses scripture to proclaim his identity and purpose. Jesus is saying, "God's written word is not dead and dull, but truly living and active. God's word is here and now. It breathes; it moves; it is alive. I am the Living Word of God."¹

Okay, so maybe Jesus does sound a little crazy. But we know better: It's actually the reality of NUTS! Never Underestimate the Spirit.

Earlier, Lynae Young and Jim Scanlon shared the Pastor Nominating Committee's update. The PNC is tasked with finding Westminster's next head of staff. As they search for Don Lincoln's successor, you and I have work to do, as well.



In today's bulletin you will find an insert with information about the PNC. For those worshipping virtually, here are the smiling faces of the eleven PNC members, along with their email.



Email PNC at pnc@westminsterpc.org

I encourage you at the end of today's service or in the coming week, to take a moment to write a prayer for the PNC. It can be as short as the letters N-U-T-S for "Never underestimate the Spirit." Or a longer message written on

the bottom of the insert, torn off, and placed in the baskets at the back of the sanctuary. From home, simply email a prayer to PNC@Westminsterpc.org. Let us continue to invite the power of God's Spirit in shaping and guiding this important effort.

NUTS. What does it stand for? Say it with me: “Never Underestimate the Spirit.”

Never underestimate the Spirit’s ability to transform an engineer into a pastor. Never underestimate the Spirit’s capacity to bring blessings out of painful experiences in our lives.

Rev. Joan Gray, a former moderator of the PCUSA’s General Assembly, has commented, “When you really think about it, this [power] of the Spirit is the only thing the early church had going for it. It had no buildings, no budget, no paid staff, and very few members.”²

Thankfully, we do have a building, budget, and staff, and many more members than most congregations, along with God’s Spirit. With all that working in our favor, imagine the possibilities ahead of us!

Westminster has been blessed with long tenures by our heads of staff. As we lean into this transition from Don’s leadership, let us not underestimate the Spirit’s power to identify our next lead pastor. Pray for the PNC to select the right person to guide us in following Jesus Christ, as we work together – day by day, and week by week – to bring good news to the poor, to free those who are captive, and to proclaim the Lord’s favor and God’s love.

In the years ahead, may Westminster continue to be a living and active reminder of the transformation the Spirit can bring through God’s life-changing grace and hope.

And – a word to the wise – watch out when you’re studying Scripture. You never know what God may be up to!!

May it be so. Amen.

¹ Debie Thomas, “Today,” <http://www.journeywithjesus.net>, posted January 16, 2022.

² Robert M. Brearley, *Feasting on the Word*, Luke 4:14-21, Third Sunday After The Epiphany, p.286.

