

Reflections on Luke 4:18-19

Sister Wendy Cotter, CSJ, Ph.D
Professor of New Testament, Emerita
Theology Department, Loyola University, Chicago

I have three sharings on the passage of Luke 4:18-19. First, from the texts that appear only in Luke's gospel, it is clear that *Jesus is the man of the Holy Spirit*, from his conception right through to his ascension. For example, the story of the Annunciation appears only in Luke:

The Annunciation (Luke 1:35):

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."

In other stories that appear in multiple gospels, Luke's version emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit:

Jesus' baptism (Luke 3:21-22):

When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

The temptation in the dessert (Luke 4:1-2):

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted.

It's also interesting to compare Matthew's version of some of Jesus' sayings to Luke's. For example:

Matthew 7:11:

If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

Luke 11:13:

If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!

If Matthew had seen "Holy Spirit" he would have copied that, rather than "good gifts". We can see how the Lukan community relies on the Holy Spirit.

And again,

Matthew 10:19:

But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say,

Luke 12:11-12:

When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say."

If Matthew had received that version he surely would have copied "Holy Spirit". By the fact that it is not in his gospel, we can see that it is probably the case that it was the Lukan community who added it, because for them, the Holy Spirit is the one who inspires, Jesus' words and inspired those other prophetic voices -Elizabeth, Zachariah, Simeon, Anna...

Luke 4:18-19 is the opening scene of Jesus' public life. Quoting Isaiah, Jesus fulfills the prophecy (which at first pagan converts would not know), and explicates that the power of the Holy Spirit has anointed him. This does refer to his baptism, but we know it is more - his very conception! **In this passage, Jesus gives the blueprint of his life, and it is the blueprint of the Church.**

Secondly, the companion theme found only in Luke is *Jesus is the Man of Prayer*. You can see precise examples in the following texts, sometimes occurring along with the Holy Spirit theme.

Jesus prays while he is baptized by the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:21):

When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened...

He prays before he chooses his disciples (Luke 6:12-13):

One day soon afterward Jesus went up on a mountain to pray, and he prayed to God all night. At daybreak he called together all of his disciples and chose twelve of them to be apostles.

And he prays for Peter before predicting his denial (Luke 22:32):

"But I have pleaded in prayer for you, Simon, that your faith should not fail. So when you have repented and turned to me again, strengthen your brothers."

It is also interesting to compare Mark's version of the Transfiguration to that of Luke:

Mark 9:2:

After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them.

Luke 9:28-29:

About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning.

Prayer is to be the life of the Church, and of all of us.

Third, and finally: the Jesus of Luke's gospel is different from the other gospels; here, Jesus is our model. In Mark, it is rather the suffering Jesus who calls us to be ready for the Cross, in all its forms, and to be misunderstood. In Matthew, his amplified sources, and his own community are seeing Jesus as something of a new Moses: teacher, and king, and one to be worshiped and followed faithfully. I know these characterizations are so minimal...

But in Luke, Jesus is so very up close to human issues of sin and need. These narratives of Luke show us the mercy of Jesus towards every person. No one is wearing the label "sinner". Jesus opens himself to everyone, and in this it is recognized that Jesus is modelling our life in the Holy Spirit right now.

A final thought: you might find it very helpful to recall that the Holy Spirit shows us what is really the truth. It is a gift of vision, of spiritual sight. In the Infancy Narratives, everyone knows the truth - Elizabeth, Zacharia, Simeon, Anna...this is so very pertinent now as we prepare for Advent and Christmas.