

Sermon – March 6, 2022
“Jesus Shaped Life – Made for This”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Luke 4:1-13

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them a blessing for your people that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Good morning! Welcome to the season of Lent! We have only had three days of fasting in Lent and we have come to the first feast day! I hope that you have begun to read the Lent devotional book. There are still copies available and if we run out, we can get you a copy. They are available in an electronic format as well. Starting today and for the next five weeks, I will be preaching from the material in the book and the Bible. If you are reading the daily readings, you will encounter some of the material covered in the sermons.

Let's test our memories this morning. I will give us a phrase and see if we can fill in the blank or missing word. If you know the missing word, just speak it out. Ready?

1. Wheaties is the “Breakfast of _____” [champions]
2. Nike tells us: “Just _____” [do it]
3. KFC describes their food as “finger-_____” [lickin' good]
4. Where's the _____? [beef]
5. Open Hearts, Open minds, Open _____ [doors]

That was pretty good. We must have spent some time watching TV. Have we ever thought about why we know those missing words from these advertisements? The reason we know those phrases is that the companies with those products spent significant amounts of money to develop those catchy phrases and to get them in front of us and eventually into our heads. My favorite is “Where's the beef?” I still remember that commercial all these years later. I may not like Wendy's a lot, but I did like that commercial and I probably ate at Wendy's in response to that advertisement. Today we are surrounded by ads. They are everywhere: on our phones, TVs, computers, and tablets. These advertisements work. They change our spending habits. They make money for the companies that invest in advertisements. That not so many of

us knew the Methodist statement is not surprising as the UMC did not invest anywhere near the money that was invested in those more memorable advertisements.

Let's be honest, has anyone else been influenced by ads? Have our purchasing habits been influenced by what we see on TV? Today, social media is an even more powerful influencer of our buying habits. Companies like Facebook, Amazon, and Google track where we go on the Internet and then sell that data to companies, marking us as potential high probability purchasers and a focused investment of advertisements. Have you ever looked at an item on the Internet to learn about it and then you get a pop-up ad in Facebook with a link to purchase that type of item? I actually like this because for the most part I am a lazy shopper. I might look for a few minutes and not find what I am searching for, but almost without fail an ad will pop up with what I am seeking. Companies would not spend large amounts of money to purchase our data from those who collect it unless they were successful in influencing us.

Let's think about who might be influencing us. Our friends, coworkers, fellow retirees, church members, and family are all potential sources of influence. The news sources we view influence us far more than we admit. We need to be cautious as to how much of these influencers we allow to be part of our decision-making process. Scientists who study the brain have noticed that the arrival of the Internet changed the way our brains are structured. Cell phones and social media have also changed the way we interact and relate to each other. How many friends do we have on Facebook? How many of them have we had dinner with? Of that group, how many have we had dinner with in the last week? How many of us have tried to worship at home with an online church? How many of those online church attendees will bring you a meal if you are ill?

Are all of these influencers bad? Not necessarily, but as Christ followers our primary influencer is to be like Jesus. Remember, Jesus is currently in heaven seated at the right hand of God the Father. We might ask, "How can Jesus be an influencer in the here and now of our lives if he is in heaven?" If we are Christ followers, then there is another force at work in our lives, a force we received in baptism, the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is at work shaping our lives, and reshaping our hearts into the image of Jesus. If you have your Bible, turn to 1 Thessalonians 4:3: "*For this is the will of God, your sanctification: ...*" In the first part of verse three, we find the word sanctification. This is the place we live as a believer after we have been justified or saved. Our life with Christ does not end at our salvation; it moves into a life of sanctification. Let's spend a few minutes trying to grasp what it means to be sanctified. First, it means to be 'holy.' And the best understanding of holiness we have is Jesus. Our thoughts are to be like the thoughts

of Jesus. When we interact and relate with other people, we are to relate to them as Jesus did and does. We are to seek to know the Father as Jesus did, seek to enter into the loving relationship that Jesus had with the Father, and we are to obey the Father like Jesus did. Now I don't know how many of us have tried to do any of these things on our own as a response to what we understand about Christian living and have failed. Our nature is to see sanctification as behavior modification that we seek in our strength and power, trying to change ourselves into the image of Christ. When we attempt this on our own, we fail. We lack the power to change ourselves. We need help. But there is good news about sanctification, God gives us the power to live as we are to live, power to grow into the image of Jesus. That power is the Holy Spirit. God does not sit back in heaven with Jesus at His side watching us struggle to live as He wills. God gives us power to fulfill His will for us. God empowers us to grow into Jesus' image. Lent is a forty-day journey where we seek to be open to the guidance of Jesus through the Holy Spirit, a journey to help us grow in sanctification, growing more fully into the image of Jesus.

We need help because sin gets in the way of our growth into Jesus' image. We are sinners. That is who we are: saved, justified sinners. We have all of this baggage we brought along with us into our new life with Christ. We may be reborn, but we have not yet grown fully into a new life in Christ. Jesus saved us not only from the penalty of sin and death, but also from the power of sin. Have we ever seen a bumper sticker on a car that reads, "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven"? This is a true statement, but it is just half of the Good News. This bumper sticker implies that we can live our lives as those who are not yet believers live, except we will be forgiven. Let's turn again to our Bibles, this time to Romans 6:6-7. 6 "We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin." We were all once enslaved to sin; sin ruled in our lives. Whatever sin said, we did. This is our passions aflame and ruling in our lives. This is the source of much of the evil we struggle with in this fallen world. Our desire for sin came from within, from our sinful nature, from our hearts. But, as a believer in Jesus, we are no longer slaves to sin. That body has been destroyed. Turn to a neighbor and tell them, "In Christ we are no longer enslaved to sin!" When our hearts say "Follow our passions" and encourage us to live out the temptations we face, we don't have to give in. We have been empowered to say "No" and not sin. We are free from sin's power through the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

As we hear this good news and look at our lives, we may find we are still enslaved to some sin. Don't be alarmed. There is no sin God cannot free us from, none. Turn to 1 John 1:9:

“If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” The words here are not “will forgive and purify from some of our sin and leave others in place.” We are freed from *all* unrighteousness. We are saved from the penalty of sin by God’s forgiveness through Jesus’ death and resurrection and our belief in Jesus as our Savior, by grace through faith. We are set free from the power of sin by God purifying and changing us through the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives. The bumper sticker that should be on our vehicles should read “Just a sinner saved by grace and being transformed by grace.”

Notice that the words are “being transformed” and not “have been transformed.” We have been freed from our slavery to sin, but like those in the Exodus, we have a journey that lies ahead, a journey where we will need to deal with the sin that clings to our lives. Now, don’t get me wrong. Many are the testimonies of people who are freed from a sin when they accept Jesus. There are countless testimonies of people struggling with an addiction who are freed when they become a Christ follower, but there are also countless accounts of people who struggle to their last breath with a sin that clings to their new nature. We have been set free from slavery to sin, and living a life like Christ lived, Christlikeness, is our new normal, but it is not natural. We have to be transformed into Christlikeness. We are not reborn holy or sanctified, but are reborn into a life with Christ. Our old nature is still present, our old desires cling to us, our old friends still expect us to be with them in the same manner as we once were. The old places where we once gathered are still where we tend to go. Our old selves cling to the new.

This situation does not sound very encouraging, so what can we do? Let’s turn now to Galatians 5:16-17. “Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want.” Our flesh that we still live in desires something other than what the Spirit leads us into. There is a conflict within us, in our hearts, for what we will do, for how we will live. Our desires are contrary to the direction the Spirit is seeking to guide us. This is the inner struggle we may find as we seek to be like Christ. It is a conflict between two natures, our old nature and our new reborn nature. In this conflict we do not resign ourselves to live out our lives in the old self with all of its enslaving desires, but to live in the hope that we can “live by the Spirit,” and as we do, we will not gratify or submit to the desires of the flesh.

We are to be those who are seeking to live under or in the Spirit’s power. Living in this manner is called spiritual growth. We grow in our ability to follow the guidance and

empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Look a little further down in Galatians at 5:22 – 23a. “By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” Those are our sanctification character traits. They sound a lot like Jesus’ character traits, don’t they? Notice that these are not traits we develop, but are a result of the Holy Spirit’s presence in our lives as the Spirit takes charge. We clearly have a role in the growth of these traits, but keep in the forefront of our minds the understanding that the Holy Spirit is the power that brings them to life in our reborn selves.

Think about some of the road signs we see as we drive the roads. Many of the signs we encounter are warnings to us, giving us an indication of what is ahead so that we might prepare for changes that will be needed to be safe on the road. There are 45 mph zone signs, curvy road signs, trucks entering the highway signs and others. One sign I don’t see here in Northumberland is “fallen rock,” a sign that was very common in West Virginia. As one entered into the high stone-walled road cuts, you would find one of these warnings. And for most of my early driving years in West Virginia, I pretty much ignored those signs. One morning that changed. I was in a car driving along very early in the morning and we came around a curve and in our lane was a fallen rock about the size of a VW Beetle. Fortunately for us, there was not another car on the road in the oncoming lane at that hour and our driver was able to avoid the rock. That experience left an impression on me and I started paying more attention to warning signs, especially fallen rock” signs. The point is that we can’t avoid what we don’t see and are not prepared to encounter. The Holy Spirit can be our sin warning sign when we are on a sin trajectory. The inner promptings of the Spirit can alert us we are acting as our old selves and need to act to change our trajectory lest we encounter a large rock, a sin barrier, run into it, and fall into sin. Sometimes we ignore those warnings of the Holy Spirit and hit the rock of sin. We decide to override the warnings and to continue on what we think is the right path and we fall again into sin. When this happens, the Holy Spirit will point out that we have made a mistake. We have sinned and fallen. The Holy Spirit then points us back to Christ, back to a life with Christ. This is the idea of grace. We fall, we get back up, and we are forgiven, strengthened, and loved by Jesus. Sometimes we are too sensitive to potential sin and will not drive down the road at a normal speed. I did slow down for a while on some of those blind curves in West Virginia when the temperatures were cycling around freezing. When we are too sensitive, the Holy Spirit will bring us peace about our concerns. We need the Holy Spirit in our lives to guide us and we need the Bible, God’s word, to instruct us about a life in Christ.

God's Spirit will empower us to change our behavior, to repent, change our minds about what we will do, and then change directions to God's will for our lives. When we repent, we stop going the way we think we should go and instead turn and go the direction God is leading us, the pathway to a renewed relationship with God. Repentance is a transformation into the image of Jesus. This is a process that requires both God's power working in our hearts and our own willingness to cooperate with God. There are two parts to our transformation. God is a part and our willingness to be changed is the second part. We simply do not have the power within us to bring about successful change, and the Holy Spirit will only enter where he is welcomed. God, through the Spirit, will not force us to change. We have free will to decide if we cooperate with God or go our own way. A.W. Tozer said, "God will take nine steps toward us, but he will not take the tenth. He will incline us to repent, but He cannot do our repenting for us." We have to be willing to move towards God. We have to be willing to get up, look to God, receive grace, repent, and try again. It is difficult and rare for a fallen believer to stand up in a congregation and share their sins and ask for help. However, in a small group of people banded together, we are able to confess our sins to one another, receive the love of others, receive their prayers, and hear the words, "In the name of Jesus Christ you are forgiven." It is in a band of sisters or brothers in Christ that we find the confidence to be real with each other and love each other as Jesus loves us. Bands are a place of transformation nurtured in the love of other believers.

If we will pray and ask the Holy Spirit to fill and direct us, Jesus will send him to us and help us follow the Spirit's guidance. Don't think of "filling" so much as filling an emptiness in us, but as the Spirit displacing something within that we cling to or are enslaved to. We are not to focus on getting rid of sin, but on becoming those who have the fruit of the Spirit. Desire the fruit instead of seeking to avoid the sin. Focus your thoughts on the things that are above and the Holy Spirit will work to change our hearts of stones to hearts of flesh. It is the Holy Spirit alone who reshapes and transforms us into the image of Jesus. Ask him today to come and fill us. Open our hearts to be those who receive and respond to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Do this not just today, but every day. Allow the Holy Spirit to identify those things that need to be released that we might have them displaced with the Spirit and be transformed more completely into the image of Jesus, the body of Christ right here, right now.

Pray with me: Come, Holy Spirit, come. Holy Spirit, help us to see what we need to release that we might be filled more fully and transformed more completely into the image of Jesus. Amen.