

*Script/ counterscript...Life powered by God the Holy Spirit*  
*Luke 13.10-17*

One of the things I appreciate about using the lectionary and focusing on a single story is that it slows us way down. If we don't stop and take a long look and careful listen, this story of the healing of the bent over woman looks like a lot any other healing story. And it becomes just another story of Jesus' healing an unnamed woman, with the familiar details of doing it on the Sabbath and irritating the faithful children of God.

But Luke is much too good of a storyteller for this story to be just another story. This story is layered with meanings. And each layer invites us deeper into the counterscript of the Living God, the counterscript of living our lives powered by the Holy Spirit.

One layer of this story is resurrection. A woman is hunched over, unable to stand up straight and Jesus calls to her, calls out the spirit that has been binding her for 18 years. Unlike some other healing stories, there is no indication that the woman came to Jesus seeking healing. She didn't initiate anything. It was Jesus who saw her and called her to him. Jesus exorcised the spirit that was binding her, then touched her. With the touch, she stood up straight. Restored. Resurrected!

And we witness the liberating and life-giving power of God the Holy Spirit. Jesus is filled with the Spirit of God. He is breathing the Spirit. His sight and insight are sharpened by the fire of the Spirit. So that, in a moment, in that crowded synagogue, he was able to see and identify the unholy spirit that had taken hold of this woman, this daughter of Abraham.

And there is the beginning of another layer. Luke gives us several cues that this story is about more than this particular woman. When he calls her a daughter of Abraham, he is of course recalling their common ancestor. And in doing so, he's identifying this woman as one of them. She belongs to them.

It's easy to imagine that she would have been shunned by her community. Because there was been a way of thinking...there still is a way of thinking...that believes that when things go wrong, when bad things happen—with our bodies or with our lives—that God is punishing us. In the context of this story, it seems likely that, because her ailment would have been seen as divine punishment, she would have been excluded from much of the community life. For being broken. For being a sinner. For being unclean.

But in the first verses of this chapter, Jesus is teaching about this very thing. He uses the story about the 18 that were killed when the tower of Siloam fell. In his teaching he's rejecting this cause-and-effect mentality, making it clear that bad things happening aren't punishment from God.

So by calling to her, Jesus is bringing this woman who has been on the margins to the center. She belongs to them. And in doing so, his encounter with her exposes something about them. Something about us.

When Luke tells us that the woman has been afflicted for 18 years, he's pointing to Jesus' previous teaching about the 18 who died. But he's also pointing to another story. He's recalling for his audience a deliverance story that descendants of Abraham and Sarah would have known and recognized. Judges 3 tells the story of yet another time when the people of God did their own thing rather than living in communities powered by the Spirit of God. And then they found themselves occupied and oppressed by foreign kings. Then in verses 14-15 we hear, "So the Israelites served King Eglon of Moab eighteen years. But when the Israelites cried out to the LORD, the LORD raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud son of Gera..."

By invoking this story, Jesus is naming that these descendants of Abraham and Sarah are repeating the old patterns. They too are occupied by foreign forces. But after 18 years, they

aren't crying out to God for deliverance. Rather, they're crying out because Jesus is breaking the rules of Sabbath. The leader of the synagogue is angry with Jesus for disrupting the space. The leader is responsible for space. There are borders and boundaries here and healing on the Sabbath is outside of his carefully constructed geography. If Jesus wanted to heal, he should have done it any other day of the week.

But the fire of the Spirit is burning within Jesus so that Jesus' hears this deeper complaint of the man in charge, the complaint that this woman doesn't belong in this place. She doesn't belong in *his* space. There are certain kinds of people who belong here and certain kinds who don't. The bent over woman shouldn't have been there. She didn't belong. And from his role as leader, with the responsibility for maintaining the borders and boundaries, he's justified in reprimanding Jesus.

And with Jesus' response we are taken into a deeper layer of the story. Listen to Luke's masterful storytelling: "The Lord answered [the leader]." Luke doesn't say, "Jesus answered him." Or, "he" answered him. Luke says, *the Lord* answered. It is the living God, Creator of heaven and earth, that is in their midst. And it is the Lord that has come to raise up a deliverer. The living, creating, liberating God is here, in the synagogue, releasing the bindings, setting the captive free. The same God is here, with us, setting us free.

With the fiery clarity of the Spirit of God, Jesus answers the leader's accusation: "You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey...? Then ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for 18 years, indeed, be unbound from this bondage on the sabbath day?"

It's harder to see and hear the hypocrisy when Jesus' words are translated into English. Listen again. This time with one word changed so that we can hear what Jesus is exposing.

“You hypocrites! Doesn’t each of you on the sabbath *unbind* his ox...? Then ought not this woman...be *unbound*...on the sabbath?”

And their hypocrisy is uncovered. The Greek word for untying their animals is the same verb as the unbinding touch of Jesus. With his response, he has pulled back the curtain of their rules and boundaries, not God’s laws, but theirs. His words reveal their lack of compassion and care—their lack of humanity—for caring more about controlling their space and the kinds of people who occupy their space—than caring for their sister, a daughter of Abraham, God’s beloved. They see and have compassion for their animals but cannot see or have compassion for their fellow human beings.

Sadly, we’re all too familiar with this kind of compassion. We see it in so many spaces and places around us. I see it within myself, allowing one set of behaviors for people “like me” and having a different set of expectations for those who are “different.”

As hard as it is to have our hypocrisy exposed, this story offers us a new way forward so that we can stop repeating the patterns that have been binding humanity for so long.

Jesus makes it clear that it is Satan that has bound this woman. In our time we think of Satan as the worst kind of evil. But there’s a different dimension of Satan in Hebrew Scripture. *Satan* is a Hebrew word meaning *adversary*, *accuser*, or *tester*. And it was a role that was taken on by different people at different times, not a single entity. I say all this to open our curiosity about satan. If we immediately reject satan and assume we have nothing to do with him, we miss the ways that he is still at work, keeping the patterns of human oppression and bondage in place. If we bring some curiosity to what satan is up to, we’ll begin to see him at work, in the world, and in us.

So to get curious, let’s return for a moment to Jesus in the wilderness. Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days and nights *in the company of satan*. Those were long days of being

tested, of being accused, of being confronted by an adversary. Perhaps we think it was easy for Jesus, or at least different for him than it is for us. But we must remember and see that Jesus was taken into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. Jesus was able to stand up straight because the Spirit of God was with him, breathing in him, breathing through him. For every test, Jesus relied on the Spirit for a response. For every accusation, Jesus relied on the Spirit to defend him. For every adversarial confrontation, Jesus relied on the Spirit of God to burn with wisdom and clarity, keeping him rooted so that he responded from his identity as God's beloved. Had Jesus relied on himself, he would have been as bent over as the woman in the synagogue.

This is the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit wasn't a special Spirit of God for Jesus, the Spirit is for *us*, here and now. The Spirit is for all humanity, for all creatures, for all creation. The Spirit is *for* the broken and bent over body of Earth herself.

And Jesus' words to the woman in the synagogue that day, *be released, be set free* are words for us. We need these words spoken on our behalf and on behalf of our world. We know what it is to be bent over, broken, and bound by adversaries and accusations. We recognize the temptations of satan. They are everywhere in the scripts writing the world. And in the scripts in our own heads. We hear the accusations in messages we received when we were children, words that still bind us in painful ways. Scripts that we are not good enough. That we don't work hard enough. That we should be better and do more. Scripts that say we aren't good or lovable. That we don't matter. That we don't belong.

These are the lies of satan that bind us. And we cannot untie ourselves. No matter how hard we try. We cannot unlock the chains that keep us in place. No matter how smart or strong we are, we can not free ourselves. No matter how hard we work or how good we are, we cannot release ourselves from the bindings of the adversary. It is the power of the Holy

Spirit that gives us eyes to see our bindings. And the fire of the Spirit that unties us. It is the Holy Spirit that unlocks the chains. It is the Holy Spirit that frees us.

When we try to do this work by ourselves, we end up perpetuating and repeating the patterns of oppression and violence. It is God the Holy Spirit that burns and breaths into conflict and bondage, bringing deliverance, and raising up new life. And where there were accusers and adversaries, God the Holy Spirit creates a new community.

We have, in our lives and in this community witnessed the power of the Spirit's unbinding. Time and again I have witnessed the liberating release of God the Holy Spirit. Whether it happens in a moment, or through time, the Spirit of the living and transforming God is here, releasing us and setting us free.

My prayer is that we continue to give ourselves to the breath and fire of the Spirit. For ourselves. But also, and perhaps more urgently, for the world and for the planet. The same Spirit that breathed into the chaos and void, and created the cosmos with Her breath has the power to breathe into the chaos of our world, raising up new creation and new life into our broken and bent over planet.

May we give ourselves to the breath and fire of God the Holy Spirit.

And may our prayers and our work be fueled by the creating, liberating, living Spirit of God.