

LUKE AND THE MISSION OF JESUS

(1) INTRODUCTION

Colossians 4:10-15

Luke 1:1-4

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SCRIPTURE

¹⁰Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, as does Mark the cousin of Barnabas, concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him. ¹¹And Jesus who is called Justus greets you. These are the only ones of the circumcision among my co-workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. ¹²Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you. He is always wrestling in his prayers on your behalf, so that you may stand mature and fully assured in everything that God wills. ¹³For I testify for him that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. ¹⁴Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas greet you. ¹⁵Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house (Colossians 4:10-15 NRSV).

¹Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, ²just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, ³I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed (Luke 1:1-4 NRSV).

MESSAGE

In recent years we have completed three series on the Gospels including Matthew, Mark, and John. Today we begin a series on Luke. As I have previously pointed out, for nearly nineteen hundred years, Christians have used four symbols to represent and summarize the teachings of the four Gospels. These symbols are taken from the Old Testament book of Ezekiel (1:10). The prophet Ezekiel had a vision of a heavenly creature¹ with four faces: human, lion, ox, and eagle. The early Christians thought of the message concerning Jesus Christ as a heavenly story with four faces. The human face is for Matthew, the lion is for Mark, the ox represents Luke and the eagle stands for John.

¹Ezekiel saw four such creatures (see Ezek 1:5).

These images have often been depicted in stained glass. We need to understand that the original purpose of stained glass in church was to teach people the key parts of the Christian Faith, especially the life of Jesus. These four pictures have stood for the Gospels and each one recognized by its symbol even by those who could not read.² Equally, this imagery was used for summaries of the Gospel message, that Jesus was born as a human being, sacrificed like an ox, rose triumphant like a lion, and ascended like an eagle.

A younger pastor was asked to fill in for the well-known Norman Vincent Peale of Marble Collegiate Church in New York. He stepped into the pulpit feeling not a little intimidated. He looked at the magnificent stained glass windows and told the congregation, "You know, these beautiful windows remind me of your pastor and his sermons. I'm afraid that I will be like that piece of cardboard in that broken window over there by comparison." He preached his sermon and after the service was over greeted people as they left. One elderly lady warmly shook his hand and gushed, "Oh Pastor, you weren't just a piece of cardboard – you were a real pane!"

The Gospels are not to be understood as complete biographies but historically based proclamations of the person and work of Jesus. Our word Gospel is from an Old English word, "Godspell." Many years ago there was a musical on the life of Jesus Christ called, "Godspell." The word means "good news" and is an accurate translation of the word that the New Testament uses – *euaggelion* – from which we get such English words as evangelism and evangelist.

Now the word *euaggelion* ("gospel") itself was not new. The ancient Greeks used it to describe the report of a significant event such as the birth of a king or a great military victory. Luke and the other gospel writers knew that the story of Jesus was even more significant. It was not just *a* gospel but *the* gospel, not just *a* report but *the* most important report the world could ever receive.

Getting back to the symbols of the Gospels – After the human face of Matthew and the bounding lion of Mark, the third symbol might seem odd to us, since the ox seems somewhat slow and stupid. However, in biblical times things were different. In the absence of modern farm machinery, the ox was the ancient world's most powerful "tractor," and a symbol of divine strength (the Pentateuch likens God to 'the horns of a wild ox' (Num 23:22; 24.8). The ox was the universal beast of burden.

² The four Gospels are symbolized by four different stained glass windows in the sanctuary of First Presbyterian Church of Battle Creek. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark are on the East side and the Gospels of Luke and John are on the West side.

However, in addition to being a literal bearer of burdens, the ox was also used to bear the burden of sin as a sacrificial animal (Lev 4.3-21; Ps 69.31). David sacrificed oxen to avert a plague (2 Sam 24:18-25). And Solomon sacrificed 22,000 oxen to dedicate the Temple (1 Kings 8:63).

So when it comes to oxen, we need to keep in mind these ancient ideas of power and strength, sacrifice and the Temple. Luke portrays Jesus as the supreme bearer of burdens, caring for all those who are burdened by sin and suffering, and ultimately giving himself as a willingly sacrifice for the whole world.

There are many other themes in the Gospel of Luke and we will be examining several of them during this series. Our sequence will be more topical than chronological. For example, in week three we will be in chapter 11 but then in week four we go back to chapter 5. Luke is the third Gospel but the fourth book in our series. This is because next year I hope to cover the Acts of the Apostles which is the second volume of Luke's two volume work. Luke and Acts go together.

Like the other Gospels, the author's name does not appear in the original writing. But the earliest title for the Gospel and the unanimous testimony of second century witnesses all point to Luke, a traveling companion of the Apostle Paul. It is also accepted that whoever wrote the Gospel also wrote the Acts of the Apostles.

The Book of Acts contains a number of passages written in the first person plural which describe events from the point of view of a companion of Paul (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-21:18; 27:1-28:16). For example:

We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days (Acts 16:11-12 NRSV).

The fact that the author of Acts makes no attempt to rewrite these passages in the third person is best explained by identifying him as the original author. Of the possible companions of Paul, known to us from his letters but not mentioned in Acts, Luke stands out as the most likely composer of Acts and therefore of the Gospel of Luke.

Tradition has always affirmed that Luke was the author of the Gospel that bears his name and we have no need to dispute that. In the ancient world it was not uncommon to attach books to famous names. But Luke was never one of the famous figures of the early Church. If he had not written the Gospel no one would have put his name on it.

But who was Luke? The New Testament mentions him three times. In his Letter to the Colossians, Paul mentions him as one of his friends who sends greetings:

Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas greet you (Col 4:14).

Paul describes him as a physician and this suggests that Luke treated Paul during Paul's imprisonments. In his Letter to Philemon, Luke is listed as a fellow-worker of Paul's which suggests that his help was not limited to his medical skill. In the letter known as 2 Timothy in what may have been one of Paul's last written messages on earth he says: "Luke alone is with me" (2 Tim 4:11). Clearly there was a strong bond between the two men.

Luke was likely a Gentile, that is to say, not Jewish. In the ending of his Letter to the Colossians, which I have already referred to, Paul mentions that Luke is with him. He also names the only Jewish believers who were with him and Luke is not part of that list.

Luke's introduction to his Gospel is unique. It is the only one of the four where the author comes out and uses the pronoun "I."

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It is also the best Greek in the New Testament. All twenty-seven books of the New Testament were written in Greek. Luke was exceptionally skilled in Greek.

His introduction follows the classical format used by all the great Greek historians. It was the highest model to be found in his day. It is as if Luke is saying to us, "I am about to tell you the greatest story ever told and nothing less than the best will do."

God deserves our best but I wonder how often we fail to bring it. Maybe we don't bring or do our best because we don't think God is worth it. By giving God our "leftovers," we are implying that we are on a higher rank than God – that God deserves whatever we can't use for anybody, or anything else. It is hard to say, but some people treat God like Goodwill is to many people. After we can't sell or give away our used merchandise then we truck it to Goodwill. But God shouldn't be the after thought. Rather we should give

God our best.

The introduction is addressed to the “most excellent Theophilus.” We do not know who Theophilus was. The fact that he is addressed as “most excellent” suggests he was a prominent official of some sort. Apparently, Theophilus has already received some instruction in the Christian Faith.

Luke seeks to present a historical account that is accurate and reliable in order to provide assurance for Theophilus that the instruction he received is soundly based – that he “may know the truth” of what he had been taught. Some translations say “the certainty” of what he had been taught. The original term (*asphaleian*) refers to something that is utterly safe and secure. Luke is providing information that has been carefully investigated and is completely trustworthy.

The name Theophilus means “lover of God.” The aim here is for all lovers of God to have a knowledge of the truth that is safe and secure. This is not a knowledge based on emotional inspiration, for that would change as frequently as the weather. Nor is this a knowledge based on the size of your bank account. You cannot take your money or material possessions with you – you never see a hearse pulling a U-haul™. Rather, Luke is providing us with a knowledge of the life and mission of Jesus that is reliable and secure. It is knowledge that is safe from being stolen, safe from being destroyed, safe from becoming unimportant, safe from ceasing to be real.

It is this knowledge that allowed the Church to survive three centuries of horrific persecution. It is the kind of knowledge that did not evaporate in the face of disease, disillusionment or even death. Doctor Luke tended Paul’s body after innumerable beatings and imprisonments. We can trust him to know what kind of knowledge lasts and what kind does not.

Luke is aware that others have written about Jesus. Indeed, most of the Gospel of Mark can be found in Luke. There are passages in Matthew that are almost word-for-word the same as in Luke – suggesting a common source. But Luke was not satisfied with just having other people’s stories. He had to have his own.

Faith is never a second-hand thing. It must be a personal discovery. All four Gospels are important. But beyond them the most important Gospel is the Gospel of personal experience. Luke had to rediscover Jesus for himself. Have you done the same?