

Engage Bible Study: Luke 1:1-4
September 12-14, 2011

A. *Why Read Luke?*

Everyone loves an underdog. We all love to see people who have been on the outside, people who no one thought had anything going for them, succeed. Here's an example that captured the attention of the world:

Show Susan Boyle video

The Gospel of Luke is a champion of the underdog and the outsider. If, in fact, Luke is the author of this Gospel he is the only non-Jewish author in the New Testament. This Gospel goes out of its way to show that the love of God and God's plan for the world includes all people, especially those that the Jewish community of Jesus' day least expected: gentiles, women, shepherds, Samaritans, the poor, the sick, tax collectors and other notorious sinners.

So, why read Luke? Because we're all underdogs and outsiders. None of us deserves the love, grace and forgiveness of God, but that's exactly what Luke promises is ours. As we read Luke confession of faith I think we'll hear God's call to each of us and all of us together to dare to trust in God's outrageous love...and there's no other message that we need to hear more. At the heart of it the Gospel is not a call to DO something; it is a proclamation of Good News which will ultimately lead us to action... not because we have to but because God has shaped our hearts and minds to want to. That's why we're reading Luke.

Here at Prince of Peace I have very specific reason for us to study this Gospel, because I have a very specific goal for our congregation. To use language that David Stark used to use, I want to raise the spiritual temperature of this place. I long to have the Holy Spirit fan the flames of our faith so that together we catch fire for the sake of the God's mission. God, I believe is calling us to go somewhere but we need enough faith to follow.

God is calling us up with God...deepen our love for God...worship and devotion.

God is calling us inward through community...love and care for one another, especially through small groups but also through spiritual care and MO.

God is calling us outward for the world...to serve and give ourselves away.

That's quite a journey God is calling us on. We need fire in our bellies for the sake of the Gospel to walk that journey, and that's exactly what I'm hoping and praying that our study of Luke will provide. I don't just want us to get smarter through this study; I long for each of us to be changed. That's what's I'm praying for.

B. Who is Luke?

So, who wrote the third book of the New Testament? According to the book itself, we have no idea. The book never claims any authorship at all. And while scholars love to debate such issues there has been wide acceptance from very early on in the Christian Church that this document was authored by a man named Luke. So, what do we know about this guy, Luke?

- A Greek and a gentile...that is, a non-Jew
- Luke was a physician and therefore an educated man. The excellence of the writing bears this out.
- Luke was not an eye-witness to Jesus' life, death or resurrection. Luke would have heard the stories that circulated in Christian community, had perhaps interviewed Peter, and perhaps had read some of the many documents that were floating around the ancient world about Jesus.
- Luke was a believer. This document that we're about to study is not merely or even primarily an historical account. It is a confession of faith that Jesus is the Son of God, the Lord and Messiah for the whole world.
- Luke was a traveling companion of Paul. He went on at least one of Paul's missionary journeys.
- Luke not only wrote this Gospel but he also wrote a companion volume – the fifth book of the New Testament which we commonly call Acts. This Gospel is the story of how God was at work in Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Acts is the story of God at work through the movement of the Holy Spirit alive in the Church.

C. When and to whom was this written?

The fact that Luke wrote this document to someone is clear from the Gospel itself. It is written to man named Theophilus, a Greek name which means "Lover of God." Scholars debate over the identity of this individual but two theories dominate.

- a. Most scholars think that Theophilus was an actual individual, a friend or at least an acquaintance of Luke, and perhaps someone important since refers to him as "most excellent" or "most honorable" Theophilus.
- b. Some scholars, however, have wondered if perhaps Theophilus is not an individual at all but actually a name for the Church, the gathered believers who are all "lovers of God".

If I had to venture a guess I would say that Luke's original intention was to write to a single individual, and somehow this became common property and the Holy Spirit used it to point people to Jesus so powerfully that it eventually came to be considered "sacred Scripture"...though I don't think Luke ever thought that he was writing anything sacred. I think Luke thought he was simply writing a letter to someone who wanted or needed to know more about Jesus. And it's important

that throughout this study we remember that what we're reading is a letter. We are literally reading someone's ancient mail!

Overall Luke's audience was probably Gentile...people outside the Jewish Community. Matthew was clearly writing to the Jews and Mark to the Romans. The fact that Luke is writing primarily to the Gentiles is seen in things like the genealogy that Luke records in chapter 3. Whereas Matthew traces Jesus' lineage back to Abraham – the father of the Jews – Luke traces it back to Adam, the father of all humanity.

In terms of sheer verses Luke is the largest contributor to the New Testament. If you add up the verses in both Luke and Acts you'll discover that Luke contributed to the New Testament even more than Paul.

And when was this Gospel written? I wish I knew! Scholars debate the date of this Gospel for good reason. Many scholars claim a date somewhere between 70-85, primarily because the Gospel is so detailed in its description of the fall of Jerusalem which happened in 70AD. Many other scholars suggest an earlier date, around 65. If Acts was written after the Gospel we know that the last events recorded in Acts happened in 62AD. It is believed that Paul was executed around 65 under Nero...who died in 68. And since there is no mention of Paul's death in Acts we can assume that Acts was finished before Paul's execution.

D. What's the purpose of this book?

Unlike the other Gospels Luke is the only Gospel to follow Greek literary protocol and include a prologue that explains the purpose of the book. We'll find that prologue in chapter one, verses 1-4 [**READ**]. From these few verses we learn several important things about the book:

- 1) Luke's Gospel is not the first or only account of Jesus. Others have handed down both oral and written materials. And in no way does Luke seek to discount these previous accounts. He refers to them as "orderly accounts" and refers to their sources as both "eyewitnesses" and "servants of the word" – that is to say both oral and written.
- 2) Luke's Gospel is written for a very specific purpose for a very specific reason – "so that you may know the truth concerning things about which you have been instructed." Luke writes to a man named Theophilus – "friend of God". By referring to him as "most excellent" we might infer that Theophilus is a man of some standing. It should be noted, however, that some scholars believe that by using the title "Most excellent Theophilus" Luke is actually writing to a general Christian audience. The word translated "truth" is better translated "certainty" or even "safety".

Theophilus has been (literally) “catechized” and Luke wishes to assure him that what he has learned is based on good information.

- 3) It seems pretty clear that Luke was not an eye witness to the events of Jesus’ birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension. He is relying upon the witness of others.
- 4) Luke has “investigated” the story of Jesus. That is to say, he has followed it closely, taking a long and careful look at the details.
- 5) Luke tells the story from “the beginning”, which is why he starts his story with the announcement of John the Baptist...part of this theme of fulfillment. John (and perhaps the later Christian Community) would see “the beginning” much, much earlier, indicating the evolution of Christian thought about Jesus.
- 6) Luke was thorough, having investigated “everything”. Perhaps this explains why nearly 30% of the material in Luke’s Gospel is found only in Luke.
- 7) Luke worked carefully, taking great pains to be “orderly”. By orderly Luke probably doesn’t mean that things are recorded in chronological order, but that it is recorded in a way that makes sense. Each piece of traditions is like a piece of cloth that Luke carefully “sews” alongside others that will help illuminate God’s purposes. Other Gospel writers “sewed” them together in different order.
- 8) Luke writes from the perspective of faith. This is Luke’s confession, his proclamation of what he believes God has done (fulfilled) in the world. It is Luke’s hope that Theophilus will grow in faith through this letter...and it’s my hope that we will as well.

E. Overview and Core Themes

While Luke has much in common with the other synoptic Gospels – Matthew and Mark – a careful reading of Luke will highlight certain themes. Watch for these core themes as we study through the Gospel:

Jesus as the Savior. Luke portrays Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s promise to send a Messiah and points to Jesus as the Savior. However, as we’ll discuss during this study the idea of Jesus as Savior probably meant something different

to Luke's original audience than it does for many of us. Luke puts his Gospel in the context of the power and politics of his day in which Caesar was commonly referred to as savior. Calling Jesus "Savior" was both politically subversive and implies that Jesus has come to reorder this world, not with power and coercion but with love.

In addition we often think of Jesus as saving us from this world and from hell...saving us for heaven. But the Gospels of the New Testament – and especially Luke's Gospel – are very much concerned with the restoration of this world, our lives right here and now. In Jesus God is putting things right. He is healing what sick and broken in this world.

For instance, Luke's companion volume, Acts, records the day of Pentecost – the promised day when God would pour out the Holy Spirit upon all people. Listen to these verses:

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?"

You'll notice that when the Holy Spirit comes the disciples seem to suddenly speak a universal language that all people understand. What's up with that? You may recall a story back in Genesis 11. The story goes like this:

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. The Lord said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."

So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel--because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

If you read Luke's story of Pentecost against the backdrop of the story of the Tower of Babel what new meaning do you get from Pentecost? That God, through the Spirit of Jesus working through the disciples, is healing and restoring the world...and you and I as people who have the Spirit of Jesus within us are

called to be a part of that restoration here and now! That's primarily what it means that Jesus is Savior. That's the primary meaning of salvation in the bible.

God's Compassion. Jesus was deeply interested in relationships. He treated people with care and concern, not merely as potential converts. Jesus enjoyed strong friendships with his disciples and other followers. And he reached out to many "outsiders" – lepers, Samaritans, tax collectors, women and children. The epitome of this theme is found in a parable that is only found in Luke...the story of the Prodigal Son.

Luke paid special attention to Jesus' treatment of the poor and his teachings about poverty and wealth. Jesus pointed out the dangers of wealth and the impossibility of serving both God and money ("woe" to the rich, [6:24-25](#); the parable of the rich fool, [12:16-21](#); the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, [16:19-31](#); the rich young man, [18:18-30](#); the Zacchaeus narrative, [19:1-10](#)). Jesus also emphasized God's special interest in the poor ("God blesses you who are poor," [6:20](#); giving to those in need, [12:32-34](#); inviting the poor, crippled, lame, and blind to the banquet, [14:21](#)). And he commanded his followers to help the poor ([4:18](#); [12:33](#); [14:13](#)).

Of special note is Jesus' friendships with women. Luke seems to have made a point of highlighting this aspect of Jesus' ministry. [Luke 8:1-3](#), for example, lists several women as close followers and supporters. This fits, of course, with Greek and Roman culture where women were active participants in business, politics, and household management. It would have been almost scandalous, however, in Jewish culture where men and women were separated in the synagogue and only men could be taught by the rabbis.

So, one of Luke's core themes is the radical inclusivity of God's love. The Gospel is for all people, for every nation regardless of who they are or where they've been. And for Luke this has all sorts of implications for evangelism...for bearing witness to the Good News to all people, trusting the Holy Spirit to do the rest.

And that leads us to the final core theme: **The Holy Spirit**. The Holy Spirit was present at Jesus' birth, baptism, ministry, and resurrection. Jesus lived in dependence on the Holy Spirit. This emphasis is carried over into Luke's sequel, the book of Acts, where we see Christians thoroughly immersed and motivated by the Holy Spirit. This theme, along with the way in which Luke highlights the importance of prayer in Jesus' life, emphasizes Jesus' dependence upon God...and implies our dependence upon God. If we are going to be a part of God's movement to restore the world we're not going to do it on our own by working hard. We're going to do it by relying upon the direction and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Next Week: *Luke 1:5-56: Two Births Foretold.*