

Luke 1:1-4
(Deuteronomy 6:20-25; Romans 15:18-21)
“A Faithful Narrative”

Introduction

The gospel according to Luke is actually book one of a two-volume narrative including the Acts of the Apostles. Luke is presumed to be the only Gentile author of Scripture, and is the only gospel writer who observes what was in his day the conventional introduction that identified a document as a piece of serious historical writing. In the opening verses, Luke addresses his patron, a man whom he refers to as “most excellent Theophilus” (a name that means “lover of God”), and explains the care with which he, Luke, has researched other accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry, consulted with eyewitnesses, and produced a document worthy of trust.

We know that Luke was a friend and associate of the apostle Paul, who refers to him in three of his letters, once as his “dear friend, the doctor.” Imprisoned near the end of his life, deserted by nearly everyone who had once labored with him, Paul was comforted by Dr. Luke, who remained faithfully at his side. No other New Testament author has produced such a sweeping history of the life of Christ and of the early church. It is fitting that in this Advent season, at the start of a new church year, we prepare for our celebration of the Messiah’s birth by listening again to this magisterial telling of the story that divides human history in two, and that alone can give it eternal meaning.

But before we enter the story that Luke sets out to tell, it is important, I think, that we pause and recognize what Luke is doing, and its relationship to what God has invited each one of us to do. Each of us is called to live in a way that reflects the glory of God. For this grand purpose we were created, and as that singular part of God’s vast creation made in his own image and likeness, we are called to offer up to God the narrative of our own lives as a unique chapter in the story of salvation.

Of course Luke is doing something unique here, in concert with the other three gospel writers. God breathed his word through them to us, and their words became the Scriptures, utterly unique in their power to bring new life and in their authority to command the obedience of faith. However, Luke added to his gospel the book of Acts, and that book is a story begun by the early church but still being written in your life and mine, a book unfinished until the end of history.

In other words, we should take our own lives and our own stories as seriously as God takes them. How differently we should live these brief days given to us if we realized that we are leaving a record in the presence of heaven and earth: either a record that serves as an example to others, or one that serves as a warning. Note how Luke approached his narrative, as an example of how faithfully and with what awe and wonder we should approach the narrative of our own lives.

Body

- 1. The gospel is not theological speculation about God, or ethical teaching about how humans should relate to each other, nor is it an account of religious feelings and affections; rather it is an account of things done by God in human history, in the lives of people like you and me.**

Context is crucial: On the Friday night redeye from Atlanta, the flight attendant's question: Do you like Alabama? Was she asking a frequent flier about my favorite states? Or, was she asking which team I thought would win this weekend's SEC title game? Or was she a lover of 1970s country music asking if I shared her appreciation of the group from Ft Payne? Or was she a spy who was to identify her contact with the question, "Do you like Alabama?" Silly as my illustration may seem, my point is that the meaning of her question depends completely upon its context. In which story is the question imbedded?

So here is the first point: The gospel is different from all other religions in precisely this sense. The gospel never calls us to a blind leap of faith. For example, in our Old Testament lesson, an Israelite father was to explain why Israel was different from the nations by telling the story of God's historical salvation of his people, Israel. The old covenant was not to be understood merely as a code of laws governing conduct. Rather, the laws arose within a story of salvation, a story of God delivering his people. Without that story, the laws made no sense and had no power to compel obedience.

When the gospel becomes merely a religious system, "Christianity," and its stories become merely another set of mythic expressions of our solidarity, or an ethical system by which we live, or a religious language for expressing our fears and longings, and we then lose what sets the Bible and its testimony apart from all other religion.

Lesslie Newbigin, in *A Walk Through the Bible*, tells of a Hindu scholar of world religions who said to him:

I can't understand why you missionaries present the Bible to us in India as a book of religion. It is not a book of religion – and anyway we have plenty of books of religion in India. We don't need any more! I find in your Bible a unique interpretation of universal history, the history of creation and the history of the human race, and therefore a unique interpretation of the human person as a responsible actor in history. That is unique. There is nothing else in the whole religious literature of the world to put alongside it.

2. Because the gospel is an account of what God has done in human history, there are always eyewitnesses to these things.

This explains the ongoing, crucial importance of both Bible study and Christian community. We study, not speculative theories, but eyewitness accounts of God making promises and then fulfilling them, whether in delivering from trouble those who entrust themselves to his care, or in delivering over to the consequences of their sin those who refuse to place their hope and trust in him.

And we must learn to listen to them as telling, not many different stories, but rather, one story. Whether we are reading the Bible's historical narratives or prophecy or poems or gospel or letters, we must understand it as one great story in four parts: Creation, Fall, Salvation and Consummation. When we break it down into little pieces, we lose the great message that it is meant to tell. As we study, we ask, What part am I reading? And what part am I living in? When we read the Bible for answers to questions it never intended to answer, then we get ourselves into trouble.

[Quote Bo Geirtz on Scripture in his book, *The Church*.]

3. When we witness what God has done, we become servants of the Word, called to tell others what we have seen and heard.

We are therefore responsible for following closely and carefully God's works, so that (like Dr Luke) we may give an orderly account of these things to those who ask. We should increasingly understand this as the heart of our life's vocation, whatever we may do for a living. It involves a willingness to understand the story of our lives in the context of God's great story of redeeming love and grace. Apart from that grace, we may be tempted to conceal and reveal the truth in an attempt to appear other than we are. We may fear exposure or rejection, the complications and consequences of truly being known.

Last year in Saigon, I met two women who considered one another close friends, who in response to my question shared with me the stories of their past, and yet who – it turned out – had never shared their stories with each other. When I asked how this could be, they said that it is complicated knowing too much about another person's past. In contrast, the Saigon area pastors I met with on that trip, and the Hanoi area pastors whom I was with this past week, made a daily feature of their time together telling their stories to one another without fear or complication.

This is our freedom in Christ, to tell of our brokenness, of things we have done and of things done to us, of joys and sorrows, triumphs and failures, and of God's amazing grace, of the gospel of Christ that makes all things new.

4. The result is a proper confidence in the gospel of Christ.

The more we study God's Word within the context of Christian community, the more we study our own lives in the light of the gospel, the more we hear of one another's stories of God's grace meeting us in our brokenness and bringing us from fear to faith, the more we grow in a proper confidence in the gospel, and the more we are able to help others toward such confidence that God has acted through Christ, and is still at work through his church.

Conclusion

In Luke, we find an immensely gifted person, a beloved physician, an extraordinary researcher and writer, who realized that the greatest gift that he could give his age was a careful, faithful narrative, the true story of God's grace in Jesus Christ, told in Luke's own wonderfully unique voice. And so too, the greatest gift that you and I can give our families, our neighbors and all those with whom we come in contact, is a faithful narrative of Christ's continuing work of salvation in us, the true story of a God who forgives rebellious sinners and makes all things new for those who heed his voice and turn to him for grace, grace that is always greater than all our sin.

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