

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, September 15, 2019

Hymns: 370 – Hallelujah! Sing to Jesus; 373 – Jesus Loves Me; 357 – How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds; Give Thanks; 497 – Word of God, Across the Ages

Scripture: Luke 1:1-4; Colossians 4:14; Philemon 1:23-24; 2 Timothy 4:11

Sermon Title: The Investigator's Gospel – Series Introduction

*Luke 1:1-4 New International Version (NIV)*

*Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*

*Colossians 4:14 (NIV)*

*Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings.*

*Philemon 1:23-24 (NIV)*

*Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.*

*2 Timothy 4:11 (NIV)*

*Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry.*

There are countless books and television programs which (for some reason) people love to bring to my attention, all of which raise doubts about the existence of Jesus – or of the Jesus whom we think we know. Many universities offer courses on “The Christian Myth,” or “The Jesus Question,” the basis of which is how little actual evidence we supposedly have concerning the historical Jesus. Blockbuster novels like “The DaVinci Code” make millions on this very premise.

If only we were able to go back in time and put a professional investigator on the case – someone not too closely connected with Jesus, someone who could interview the eyewitnesses, review the first-hand material, even meet with and speak with the family. Someone with an analytical turn of mind, educated in the finest tradition of Greek science and logic of the day – a physician, perhaps, who

could look at these reports of so-called “miracles” with a skeptical eye. If only there was someone who could take all the reports circulating about Jesus in those very first days, and synthesize them into a coherent account, so that the generations who follow could have good, solid reliable historical data about Jesus – who he was, what he said, what he did – and the impact he had upon his contemporaries and his world. If only we had such a person. Then, we would know what to believe.

The amazing thing is, we do. We have just such a person. And his name is Luke. And he wrote just such an account. But who is he? Where did he come from? And how did he get involved?

What we know about Luke comes not so much from his own writings – Luke is not interested in writing about himself, or in making himself the “star of the show.” What we know of him comes from the letters of the Apostle Paul. Luke was one of Paul’s travelling companions. He joined up with Paul in 49-50 AD, on Paul’s Second Missionary Journey – the journey that would bring the Gospel into Europe – and ultimately to us. Paul had stopped in Troas, the west coast of today’s Turkey, and as a result of a vision, determined to cross the Aegean Sea into Macedonia. While in Troas, Luke joined Paul’s team. It is possible he did so in his capacity as a physician – Paul calls him “the beloved doctor” – which wouldn’t be surprising, as Paul had undergone significant physical hardship in his previous 16 or 17 years as a Christian. Whether Luke was a Christian before meeting Paul is unknown; tradition says Luke was a native of Antioch, which already had a large Christian population, thanks to the missionary work of Paul and his previous partner, Barnabas.

What’s neat is how we come to know that Luke joined the team. He himself is silent regarding his role, but as a good historian, he lets us know we are now getting the information first-hand. You see, Luke also wrote the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, found in your Bibles right after the Gospel of John. “Acts” is “Part Two” of the Gospel of Luke, and begins this way (Acts 1:1-2):

*In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.*

That “former book” is the Gospel of Luke. In Part Two – “Acts” - Luke tells the story of the Early Church, from the Ascension of Jesus, through the Day of Pentecost, the ministry of Peter, the establishment of the Order of Deacons, the conversion of Paul, the subsequent Missionary Journeys, and so on. And it is on that second Missionary Journey, as the team departs from Troas, that the story changes from “they” to “we”; listen to these verses from Acts 16:

*Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia ...they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas... During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia... After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia... From Troas we put out to sea...*

Luke, as revealed by his use of “we,” is now part of the team. And he would remain as part of that team, personal companion and physician to Paul, to the very end of Paul’s life, even through the time of Paul’s imprisonment. Many scholars think it was during these years of Paul’s incarceration that Luke began and perhaps even completed his two-volume work. We know that Acts ends before Paul’s death, which it does not record.

It was during their travels together that Luke had the opportunity to speak with the “*eyewitnesses and servants of the word;*” those who were with Jesus from the beginning. And perhaps even the *very* beginning: many early Christians writers credit Luke with visiting with and interviewing Mary, the Mother of Jesus herself, either in Jerusalem or during her time in Ephesus. This tradition is so strong that the earliest visual representations we have of Luke, in the form of icons, show him literally painting a picture of Mary and the infant Jesus, symbolizing his first-hand contact with her. Small wonder we get such detail of the Infancy Stories of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, including Mary’s song (which we call the Magnificat) and her internal thoughts upon many occasions, such as when we are told, “*she treasured these things in her heart.*” Through Luke’s words, he paints her picture for us.

Another interesting and unexpected aspect of Luke is that, unlike the great majority of New Testament personalities, Luke is a Gentile, which means, “Not Jewish.” Mary, Joseph, Jesus, John the Baptist, Peter and the Disciples, Mary Magdalene – all Jews. Christianity was born from the cradle of the Jewish faith, and all the early Christians were Jewish. To be a non-Jew and to follow Jesus meant to become a Jew, and then follow. It was a major revolution in thought, and quite a crisis in the

Early Church, to allow non-Jews to become Christians, without first converting to Judaism. Peter was the first to realise this truth, and it was affirmed by Paul and Barnabas, as many non-Jews began to respond to the Gospel. Luke was one of these. As a result, the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts is sympathetic to the non-Jewish believers, highlighting their stories, which is good news for predominantly Gentile PEI!

So we've got an author who is both an insider and an outsider, able to write from both perspectives: an insider insofar as he himself is a Christian, part of the inner circle of the prominent St. Paul; an outsider in that he is a Gentile, and a latecomer to the faith. He's described as a Greek, but his Gospel makes it clear he is also at home in Hebrew. He's a physician, and speaks with professional courtesy when writing of his fellow physicians, yet he records many, many inexplicable miraculous healings performed by Jesus, Peter and Paul. He is the writer of a Gospel, but is up-front about consulting other written sources, and incorporates some passages directly from Matthew and Mark's Gospels, as well as having material they don't include – such as the Parables of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan. He himself was not, as far as we know, an eyewitness to Jesus, but he stresses the importance of first-hand testimony. He is self-effacing, never referring to himself by name, yet lets us know when he is part of the story too.

When you get right down to it, he's the perfect one to write a Gospel for us, for our demands for rigorous historical research, for our deep suspicion of Fake News, for our desire for the truth.

Listen again, as Luke himself describes his method – a method identical to that of any worthwhile investigative reporter in today's world:

*Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*

But who is this Theophilus? There are a couple of choices here. First of all, he may well be a high-ranking official of some sort, since Luke addresses him as “most

excellent” in respect of his position. Perhaps Theophilus is his actual name. But there’s a risk involved in being identified by name as a follower of Jesus; remember, Luke is writing in Rome at the time his leader, Paul, is imprisoned for his faith. Jesus’ own brother James is about to be killed in Jerusalem; and the brutal persecution by the mad Nero is just around the corner, which would see the death of Peter, and countless other Christians. Perhaps Luke, in writing this letter to this “most excellent” personage, is using a pseudonym: “Theophilus” means “Friend of God,” so if you are giving someone a cover name, so they don’t get arrested for being a Christian, that’s a good one. Some have even speculated that Luke is writing his Gospel and the Book of Acts to form a legal defense for the imprisoned Paul, but that remains no more than speculation.

The other choice is that Luke is writing for us all – all who are, or wish to be, a Theophilus - a “Friend of God.” Jew, Gentile, Roman, Samaritan; male, female, slave, free; rich, poor, servant, King; Luke writes for us all, that all of us “*would know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*” You can count on this, says Luke. The best eyewitnesses, the most reliable sources, the most complete documents, the first-hand testimony and experiences – it is all here. When you read this, you’ll know what happened. When you read this, says Luke, “you’ll know Jesus as I have come to know him: as Messiah, Saviour and Lord.”

And so we will be joining Luke on our journey of faith this church year. Our Fall, Winter and Spring theme, for Sermon and Bible Study, is “The Investigator’s Gospel.” Chapter by chapter, story by story, we will listen in on the eyewitnesses, on those who were in on the story of Jesus “from the first.” We’ll eavesdrop on the leadup to the birth of Jesus’ cousin John. We’ll gain an insight into of the very mind of Mary. We’ll stumble to the stable in the company of shepherds. We’ll watch Jesus grow from promise to infant to child to man. We’ll walk the paths of Galilee, we’ll sail upon its sea. We’ll hear the call to follow, and with Peter and Andrew, James and John, the Marys and the Marthas and the rest, we’ll see the crowds begin to grow. We’ll listen to the parables of Jesus, we’ll hear how he welcomes the outcast, our jaws will drop as he heals the sick and frees the tormented, we’ll marvel as he turns no one away.

And in the last ten chapters of the Gospel, we’ll experience the Passion of Jesus, as he turns his face towards Jerusalem, and resolutely walks the path of our salvation. We will see how Jesus not only knows what’s coming, but knows it has to come, if

you and I are to have any hope of experiencing the love, the forgiveness, the Resurrection Life he promises. We will stand at the foot of the Cross, at the face of the tomb, and, come that glorious Easter day, in the blinding light of Resurrection glory.

That's where we'll be this year; that's what we'll experience; and throughout, we will have the good Doctor Luke as our reliable guide.

To maximize your experience, and to receive the fullest possible blessing for your life and your faith, I encourage you to not only rely upon my words, but to listen to Luke directly. We'll be pacing ourselves out at a chapter per week; take time on your own to read that week's chapter, both before and after Sunday. Better yet, read the whole Gospel through before we even begin, to get a flavour for Luke's style, to develop an ear for his voice, and a sense of where his heart and mind are at. The entire 24 chapters are only 40 pages or so – a couple hours reading at most. Do so in a good, modern translation, since Luke wrote in a good, modern style for the people of his day, in the language they could readily understand. To really dig deep, come to our new Tuesday night studies as well, and see how this Gospel can come alive – or, to say it more correctly, can help us come alive to it, and to find new life – real life - in Jesus.

If only we were able to go back in time and put a professional investigator on the case – someone who could interview the eyewitnesses, meet with and speak with the family. If only there was someone who could take all the reports circulating about Jesus in those very first days, and synthesize them into a good, solid reliable historical account. If only we had such a person - then we would know what to believe.

We do. His name is Luke. And he did just that for you, Most Excellent Theophilus - for you, Friend of God - so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught; so that you and I might know the truth about Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Buckle up – what a journey it will be! Thanks be to God! Amen.