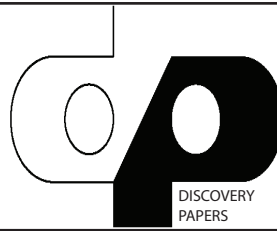


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SERIES: INVITED: STORIES OF
WELCOME IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE.



Catalog No. 20160710
Luke 1:1-4, 4:17-22
1st Message
Steve Zeisler
July 10, 2016

Luke 1:1-4, 4:17-22

Good morning. It's great to be here. Some of you who have come in recent months will not know that I used to do this for a living. I have been in this pulpit some over the years. I've missed being here, and it's really great to be back.

I observed in the first service as well as in the second that there's been no outbreak of risk taking or creativity—everybody still sits in the same seat as they always did. I'm glad to know that nothing has changed!

We are beginning a series this morning on Luke's Gospel. Dan Westman, Corrie Gustafson, and I have worked together on this series. We'll take turns preaching throughout the summer. I love working with Corrie and Dan. It's been a great experience. I'm so excited about where PBC is going and what's happening here these days.

There is an old poem written in 1866 by a woman named Arabella Katherine Hankey that was set to music. Katherine was an abolitionist and a missionary nurse. At one point, she was sick for a time, and she wrote a long poem. Some of it survives to this day partly because it was set to music. It's still found in Christian hymnals.

I Love to Tell the Story

*I love to tell the story of unseen things above,
Of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love.*

I love to tell the story, It's done so much for me

*I love to tell the story, for those who know it best
Come hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest.*

I love to tell the story to those who've never heard,

*I love to tell the story, because I know it's true
I love to tell the story Of Jesus and his love¹*

The older I get, the more inclined I am to resonate with the perspective of that song—to be a storyteller. I used to like to win arguments, and make pronouncements, and do other vocal efforts in Jesus' name. But more and more over time, I find that telling the story of Jesus and

his love—including me in his love—and the stories that we have in Scripture of Jesus are compelling. I find myself returning there more and more often.

We have been feasting over the last nine months in the life of David, which is a story of Jesus in its own right it. It is the story of preparation for the coming of the Savior. In the fall, we're going to pick up the story of Jesus and his love as it was expressed in the book of Acts, the early church, the youngest first Christians.

But for this summer, between the story of David and the beginning of the book of Acts series, we're going to spend time in Luke's Gospel. Since Luke was the author of Acts as well as the Gospel of Luke, this series is a warm-up for what's coming. It's also an answer to the anticipation that we lived with during the David series

Obviously, in nine weeks we're going to have to excerpt the book.; Luke is the longest book in the New Testament. We're going to miss a good bit of it, but we're going to pick up portraits, stories, and accounts that help us see from Luke's eyes the important tenderness of Jesus, especially his seeking out those who would otherwise have been left behind.

The assignment I'm undertaking this morning is to look at two texts. The first verses of the book of Luke are a prologue in which we meet Luke the storyteller. My hope is that we will gain an enthusiasm to become storytellers ourselves. That we'll see how Luke found himself in the role of espouser in telling the story of Jesus. I hope in that way our hearts will be fired up to become those who tell the story as well.

In Chapter 4 we're going to turn and meet the Savior of the world. We'll meet the center of all the stories—of all human stories: Jesus, in self introduction. Where in his own voice he tells us about himself and why he's come. We're going to meet the author, the storyteller, hoping to become storytellers ourselves. Then we'll have a first introduction to Jesus' ministry, and that will launch us into the rest of the series for the summer.

Who is Luke? Who is this storyteller that might serve as a good model for us? Tradition is firm, and the best scholarly opinion is also firm in saying that Luke is a man that Paul calls the “good physician” in one of his letters. Luke was a medical doctor. He was a companion of Paul, but most importantly he was a Gentile convert to the faith. The other Gospel writers were all Jewish, but Luke was not; he was a Gentile.

Luke was the writer that came in from the outside, and that perspective is important.

I remember doing a memorial service some time ago for a woman that I didn't know very well. I was fascinated to hear people speak about her, as is frequently the case at a memorial service. Folks stood up in and told stories, similar to a Gospel writer, of the woman who was no longer with us. A woman whom they loved. The first group of folks that spoke were her children. Each of them spoke with tears in their eyes, often, about how much their mother loved them. How secure they felt growing up knowing she loved them. That she believed in them, that she challenged them, that she accepted them. The foundation was firm under their lives because she cared so much for them.

There was another group at the service who were the spouses of these children. They also spoke and told stories of how they were welcomed into a place they had not known had existed. They too were loved by this beloved saint, this marvelous Christian woman. Their experience of not knowing the kind of things they discovered with her: the warmth, the care, etc.; all that goes into becoming part of a good family.

I noticed that each of these two categories of folks were saying how good the person they loved had been to them, but they weren't the same stories. To have been somewhere else, then to have been invited in as an adult to discover what you didn't know existed, was different than having lived with it all along.

That's the difference between Luke's account of Jesus and the accounts of the other Gospel writers. There was a time when Luke didn't know the background that went into Israel and its history, and why the Messiah should come from Israel, and what it all meant. Luke didn't know that background. We might read Ephesians 2:12 as a description of a Gentile who has become a believer.

Ephesians 2:12:

Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

“Once were far off...once without hope in the world.” Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, you have been brought close by his blood.

Luke is going to have a perspective that both Dan Westman and I have already noted is somewhat different than the other Gospel writers, and one that we want to learn from.

Let me list some of the things that are distinctive in Luke. The book is inclusive, to use a modern term. Extra attention is paid to the rejected, the poor, the broken—those who are left outside the circle.

As a storyteller, Luke is concerned about the wider world, not just the nation and people of Israel. In fact, famously he begins the narrative of Jesus' birth by saying a decree went out from Caesar Augustus proclaiming that all the world should be taxed. Luke wants to tell the story of Jesus' birth by recognizing that there is a wider world out there into which Jesus was being born, and those people matter as well.

Luke has a particular fascination for the parables of Jesus. I believe the reason is that most of the parables are human stories. They aren't based on knowing the history of Israel or knowing the laws of the people of God. The parables are human stories about things that happen to human beings, and human beings have come from many places.

Luke is the most women-aware of the Gospel writers. More often than any other, he takes note of women, he observes them, and he gives them voice in his Gospel.

Luke is the most conscious as a storyteller of the Holy Spirit—the wind who blows where he will with surprising results.

One volume is not enough for Luke. In order to tell the story of Jesus well, you have to tell the story of not only a life that ends in death and resurrection and ascension, but a life that extends to the world.

So Luke wrote a second volume, the book of Acts, to complete the story as he understood it.

He is a storyteller. We should become storytellers.

Luke 1:1-4:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, 2 just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, 3 it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

There are a few things here that are worth our paying attention to. The first is the designated recipient, the intended recipient that Luke is writing for. There is an individual that he is compiling this for. That individual is also a Gentile, an outsider, again by tradition. We assume that Theophilus is probably a pseudonym for an important Roman official. The book of Acts ends with Paul in Rome. It's very likely that Luke, as Paul's companion and friend, is seeing Rome as the destination, the center of the world. The Gospel has gotten there. It may well be that there is a Roman official whose identity Luke is concealing for the time being. This official is not yet a believer, but is interested. So he goes by the name of Theophilus, which means "beloved of God." Luke is compiling this Gospel story for Theophilus.

A good thing about this point is it gives me a chance to tell an old, corny joke. I was telling Dan and Corrie earlier that I am I'm hoping they will revive the tradition at PBC of terrible, corny jokes in every sermon. We used to do this routinely. It used to be part of our DNA, but we've lost it. I think this summer we ought to revive corny jokes, and here's the Theophilus joke.

A young couple have their first child and they bring the baby home. They are asked about it: "What's the little guy's name?" "Theophilus." "Well that's a different name, a curious name. Why would you choose Theophilus as the name for your baby?" They said, "The doctor gave

us the name. When the baby was born, the doctor took him in his arms and said, "That's the awfulest baby I've ever seen."

Maybe the corny jokes ended for a reason. I don't know. In any case, hopefully we'll revive that in addition to all the other things are going to get done this summer.

The fact that Theophilus means "beloved of God" is crucial, because it's a way of seeing people who are yet outside the faith. It's an important perspective to have on folks who are inquirers, or uncertain, or unaware, or who've had their questions not answered yet. Do we see them as something less than? Do we see them as, "Too bad for them."?

How do we conceive of folks who are yet outside the faith? For Luke, his friend was beloved of God. The one to whom he is writing—the one he's hoping to persuade—is someone that is already loved by God.

Do you know the concept of a Secret Santa? It's interesting to see children for the first time run into this game you play. You're given the name of someone in your school or your club and you become their Secret Santa. Someone has your name, and they are your Secret Santa. It's cool for kids to think, "There's somebody out there who is writing me notes of encouragement, who is sending me little gifts, who is thinking about me, that wants blessing for me. I don't know their name yet, but there's somebody out there that wants to do good for me."

In a very small sense, that's the perspective that Luke has on his friend Theophilus. You don't know yet how much you're loved. You don't know yet the name of the one who loves you enough to die for you. He's still a secret. He's still unclear to you. But that's the perspective Luke has. That's the insight he has about one who is yet outside the faith. God doesn't just obviously love those who already know him. He loves those whom he is hoping to embrace.

A second thing we learn from this prologue is that Luke is writing in a community. He refers to "what has been accomplished *among* us." He is not writing as an individual persuading another individual. He's not writing to purvey ideas that can be accepted or not accepted by Theophilus. Luke is urging that Theophilus become part of a movement—join a people. Luke himself is writing from a community and implied is that Theophilus, if he believes, will also be among us, part of the community.

Early Christians never understood themselves to be purveyors of ideas alone. They were always community builders, church builders; those who assumed that folks would join with others who also believe.

A third thing we can see from this introductory prologue is that Luke believes there are facts and there is misinformation available about Jesus. There are eyewitnesses who have carefully kept track of events. They have written about them in such a way to draw conclusions that are true and right. They have passed such things on to us, and I am doing so to you. There's a perspective on truth that Luke is arguing for. Then he says there are other versions of the Jesus story and you should not believe those. You should believe the ones that come from my witnesses that are reliable, and you should disbelieve those that are made up for other reasons—to try and use the Jesus story for other ends.

That's always been true. From the very beginning it's been true. It's still true today. Every now and then you run across someone that has a new idea. They've had a breakthrough understanding of Jesus. We've never quite got it right all along. But, "I'm now a Marxist revolutionary, and you know what? Jesus was a Marxist revolutionary. Nobody knew until I realized that, looking with the lens that I have." Or "He's just like the advocacy position I have for myself. Or "Jesus is a white supremacist." Or "Jesus is a sophisticated liberal academic." Or "Jesus is an off-the-grid vegetarian."

The point is, people claim to have a perspective on life and want to attach the name of Jesus of Nazareth to what I already believe. Luke is saying that's not acceptable. The eyewitnesses told the story the way it happened. It's not enough to just have a warm inner sense of well-being about Jesus. There's stuff to believe. You're supposed to be persuaded. He wants at the end of the day that Theophilus would become certain of things that he is not yet certain of.

There is an expectation of belief that is behind Luke's introduction and if we're storytellers, we can pick up some of those same things. We can know that those who are outside are loved. We can know they're being invited into a community, not just being given ideas. We can know there is truth and error that should be clarified, and urge people to believe the glorious, marvelous, wonderful, true things that the Scriptures say about the Savior.

I said that there are two parts to this introduction. The second is to meet Jesus. For that we turn to Chapter 4. We've met the biographer, the storyteller. Now we meet the Lord as the summer series is in view. This is the One we will continue to see week after week; the One we will continue to engage with week after week in Luke's Gospel.

Unfortunately, we're going to skip over three and a half chapters: the conception, the birth, the childhood, the baptism, and the temptation of Jesus.

Again, the problem is we don't have time for everything. We've undertaken to spend only nine weeks on this series, so we're skipping and we will continue to skip chapters. But I do want take us to a gripping, dramatic event. It takes place in a synagogue in Nazareth. It's verse 16 of chapter 4.

We know from the other Synoptic Gospels that this event, also described by Mark and Matthew, is given to us in extended form in the book of Luke. Luke has given us a longer version of the story of Jesus reading the Scriptures at his home synagogue in Nazareth. We also know that Luke has moved it forward in time, as if it begins the Galilean ministry. Jesus' first public ministry was in Galilee, the region he was from.

After some period of months, Jesus comes to his home hometown and speaks. Luke sees this self-description of Jesus as so important that he moves it forward so it's the first thing we run into; when Jesus' own voice begins to speak of himself. This is the first event. It's the lens Luke wants us to use to read the rest of what's coming.

Luke 4:16-22:

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. 17 And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

**18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.**

**He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the
captives**

and recovering of sight to the blind,

**to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor?"**

**20 And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.
21 And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."
22 And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, "Is not this Joseph's son?"**

There's a tension or incongruity in this paragraph—the events, the voice of Jesus, even the actions of Jesus as he takes the scroll and he unrolls it. He finds the place and he reads with a clear, penetrating voice. Then he rolls up the scroll and hands it to the attendant. All eyes were fixed on Jesus.

The action that is here, and the words even more so, is overwhelming, powerful, mind blowing, unbelievable. Something extraordinary is happening here, but the setting is completely non-extraordinary. The Scripture says Jesus went to his home town on a Sabbath day—just an ordinary Sabbath. It wasn't a holy day. There wasn't anything important about the particular day. His hometown was Nazareth, which itself is an unimportant place. The Savior of the world is making himself known and this event doesn't take place in Rome, or in Jerusalem, or Athens, or anywhere important; it takes place in Nazareth.

We realize that by the end of the passage, nobody listened to Jesus. "And they get rose up and drove him out of town" (Luke 4:29). Those who heard what Jesus said wanted nothing to do with his message at the end of the day. So the setting is disappointing. The message is mighty. It's part of the way God acts always, doesn't he? He puts treasures in earthen vessels. He uses instruments that seem unworthy of his use. He goes to places, and finds people, and acts in ways that are surprising, given what the circumstances suggest. But if we listen carefully to what's being said, the world is about to change.

So, what does Jesus say? He is reading one of the great prophetic texts that announced the coming of the Messiah. Israel has known for centuries that through this people, through this nation, the Savior of the world was coming. The one who would finally set right the broken things that happen over and over again in this world. The Savior of the world is coming. The Israelites have known that, and it's been predicted for them that the Savior will introduce the messianic age. He will inaugurate a world in which things are finally set right.

Think about how disappointed we are with a world that has leaders that make grand promises and fail over and over again to keep them. We put our hope in someone that finally this time, this election, or this NBA championship, or whatever we're hoping for will finally meet all our needs, be what we hope it would be. Hopes are dashed over and over again. We trust people that are unworthy of our trust. We give up hope that anybody can change. People don't change, time after time. You think, "I don't change. Nobody and nothing will ever change in my life. History is not going anywhere There's no good end point to history. The sun rises, the sun sets. There's nothing new under the sun."

Yet, the promise has always been that someday the world will change. That there is a leader who is going to make a difference and he is going to change history. When he comes, we can by faith draw on history that hasn't happened yet. We can draw on a Jubilee—the favorable year of the Lord—and live based on it, even now.

The people of God have been waiting. Jesus uses all the language of the Messiah to come: the one who sets captives free; the one who gives sight to the blind; the one who ministers to the hurting.

In his reading of the text, we could hear that the lasting Jubilee has been sounded on the shofar: debts cancelled, the lost brought home, barriers removed, the unrighteous silenced, reconciliation and peace established. In the words of John, "If the Son sets you free, you're free indeed" (John 8:36). Jesus is reading this text. His voice is clear and penetrating. Eyes are on him. The Spirit of the Lord is on Jesus, and then taking their breath away. This Scripture was fulfilled that day in their hearing. The Isaiah text had been read in the synagogue time and time again. They had heard it read, but always it was about someone other than the reader. This time the text was about the reader: Jesus. The promise in the text was fulfilled that day in their hearing. But nobody believed him. He was rejected as he spoke.

The problem of course, the condition that's given by Jesus even in as he spoke here, is that we have to have ears to hear. The fulfillment is in your hearing. If you can hear the truth, if you will be persuaded having heard the truth by what you hear, you will be different forever. The world you live in will be different forever. The use God will make of your life will be different forever. The hopelessness you feel need not grip your heart again and again. The hard and broken, violent, racially antagonized world we live in...we have reason to hope it doesn't last forever. We can be part of making things different. We

can draw on a world to come, a Jubilee to come, and we can bring it back by faith into the experience around us. The world doesn't have to be the way it's always been, but only if we hear him say it and believe. Only if we hear what he says and believe what he says, and are changed by what he says. Most of those around Jesus weren't.

Luke is a storyteller that might inspire us to tell stories. The question in this text is: "Are we hearers of this story?" What do we hear when Jesus says these things of himself? There are a few things that make it hard for us to hear, that routinely stop our ear, tickle our ears, so his voice doesn't persuade us as it ought to.

The first is familiarity breeds contempt. People sat listening to Jesus and said, "He's been in the synagogue year after year. We've known him all his life. Isn't this Joseph's son? Why should we conclude that he's anything special? We've heard these texts before, time and time again. Why is now the day that the promise is fulfilled? It wasn't fulfilled the last time it was read here." We're used to worlds that are used to false promises being made. We're used to brokenness winning every time.

People were being challenged to believe something different and that's hard to do. We're the same way. We're much more likely to be captivated by some explosive new thing then to try to look back at the great truths and call on God to make them real to us and for us. We're much more likely to be swept up with flashy new things then to go back into the presence of God and call out to him for a heart that can believe the wondrous things that he's done. It's too familiar, perhaps.

I think the second thing we need to observe is that if the Messiah comes for the poor and the oppressed and the blind and the captive—if that's whom he speaks to, where are we in the story? We spend most of our time trying to avoid the poor, the oppressed, and the outcasts. We look for ways to avoid contamination by the losers of the world, or being considered as one of them.

We want to create a fiction of ourselves as champions, the successful. And Jesus said that the Messiah has come for those in need. The awful conclusion is this: we are the ones in need. If he comes for those who are broken, and our hope is in him, then we're the broken. The poor are not somebody else. The blind are not somebody else. They are us.

Jesus healed a blind man in John chapter 9. It's recorded that the Pharisees were upset with Jesus because the healing happened on the Sabbath day. They objected and Jesus said, "Well it's up to you. Eyesite is up to you." The Pharisees who heard these things said to him, "Are we also blind?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains" (John 9:40-41).

Jesus is trying to give them what they will not accept. They insist they already have it, that they are not the ones in need. In a similar situation, Jesus gave a terrible judgment to the church and Laodecia in Revelation chapter 3, "For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" (Revelation 3:17).

I believe the main reason that we don't have ears to hear—that Jesus' voice doesn't persuade us of the messianic age that we can partake of, doesn't persuade us of his authority to banish evil—is that we have to face square on the broken stuff inside us and we don't want to do it. We need help to do it, and we need time and wrestling with God to do it.

That's what we're going to talk about this summer. We're going to talk about the stories of Jesus being different than he was expected to be, being different than we might tell if we were writing his story.

The hope is that we will hear stories in ways that are clear and unambiguous, ways we can grasp and be changed by. We'll tell the stories that we've heard. I think it's going to be good summer journey for us.

Endnotes

¹ Hankey, Arabella Katherine. *I Love to Tell the Story*. 1866