

Sermon for the Feast of St. Luke

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Text: Luke 1.1-4; 24.44-53

The feast of St. Luke often focuses on his being a physician and relating his vocation as a practitioner of the healing arts to his later calling as an evangelist bringing health and wholeness through the proclamation Gospel of Jesus Christ.

But there is another aspect of St. Luke that is often overlooked, in part because it isn't from our Lutheran tradition, but rather is from the tradition of the Byzantine Church from at least the 6th Century, which is that St. Luke was the first iconographer as is illustrated by the icon in front of the altar this morning and a copy of which was set out at the door. It shows Luke writing, with the guidance of Holy Wisdom an icon of Mary the Holy Mother of God, and the child Jesus, which, according to legend, he then sent along with his Gospel to Theophilus.

Now regardless of the value we might place on such legends, or even what we might think of icons in general, this particular image is, nonetheless, instructive not simply because of how illustrates today's Gospel reading, but what it teaches us about St. Luke and his vocation and what that means for our vocations both as baptized believers, called to live in the promise of salvation, and especially for those of us here today who have been ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament, who have the joyous burden of standing in the pulpit and serving at the altar.

First let's consider the subject of the St. Luke's work, both in the icon and the Gospel. The subject is the same in each – our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. While the image is referred to as "St. Luke writing the first icon", St. Luke is really not the main subject, any more that he is the subject of the Gospel that bears his name. Rather the icon is written so as to draw our gaze to the figure of the Christ child in the icon St. Luke is writing. The eyes of all three of the larger figures are all directed to the image of Jesus, and even in the smaller image, Mary is looking intently at her son and showing the way to him with her hand. It's no understatement to say that were it not for Jesus in this icon, there would be no reason for the other three figures to be there, because each in their own way is present, only because of him.

Likewise in St. Luke's gospel, his stated purpose for writing is to present an orderly account of the life and ministry of Jesus. This account is not only orderly but also the most extensive of the four gospels—beginning with the announcement of the birth of the forerunner, John the Baptist and concluding with the Ascension. But the goal is not to simply provide an exhaustive historical narrative, but rather to teach and encourage the readers and hearers of this gospel in their faith in Christ Jesus.

This is evident throughout the gospel, but especially in the later verses of this morning's reading where St. Luke records the words of Jesus himself, teaching the apostles. Here in 24.45, St. Luke indirectly points out the limits of his work. He writes that 'Jesus opened the disciples' understanding

so they might comprehend the Scriptures'. While there is no indication of St. Luke's view on the inspiration of Scripture, or if he understood this work to be divinely inspired, this verse is a reminder that a full, salvific and faithful understanding of Scripture is a gift of the risen Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Apart from the living Lord, Scripture is at best a well-written and interesting ancient document. By including this verse, it seems that Luke understands his 'orderly account' only has benefit if used by the Holy Spirit.

We see this illustrated in the icon. St. Luke is shown writing his account of Jesus. Those of you who have had opportunity to study icons or hear the presentations of our brother Fred Schumacher, know that an icon is not just a piece of religious art, but is a presentation of theological truth for salvation. So for example, in writing Jesus as a child with his mother, St. Luke is presenting the truth of the incarnation. The Holy Theotokos, by her gaze and gesture is directing attention towards her son who is the way, the truth and the life.

As St. Luke writes the icon (his hand pointing to Jesus), Divine Wisdom appears in the figure of an angel standing behind him guiding his hand as he writes—a visible reminder of the necessity of the power and guidance of God in any undertaking of faith both in the creation and reception.

And who was the intended recipient of the gospel and this icon? According to the opening verses of the gospel and the legend mentioned earlier, St. Luke intended both for Theophilus. I'll skip the various commentary explanations and speculations about who Theophilus was or wasn't, because it matters less who Theophilus was than who Theophilus is. Loosely translated, Theophilus means "lover of God", and that being the case then I'm Theophilus, as are each of you gathered here today Theophilus.

We are lovers of God because we were first loved by God. Luke's work is an account of god's love in action—at work to draw us into a saving and life-giving relationship with Him.

But Luke's work, whether Gospel or icon, were never meant to stand on their own. It was not Luke's intent to produce a properly ordered collection of objective facts about Jesus. If that was the case it is hard to imagine him bothering to expend the time and effort.

Luke had higher aspirations for his work—that it would be within the will of God, used and enlivened by the power of God. The goal was not that Theophilus or we would just learn some things about Jesus but that we would, by the power of the Holy Spirit know Jesus, our living Lord, and experience the fullness of salvation. The aim is not to study the life of Jesus and by following his example and teaching to become a better person, but to know Jesus and be raised and released from sin and death into freedom and life in him.

As it has been said, Jesus did not come to make bad people good, but to make dead people live. That is the ultimate aim of Luke's work—that the readers and hearers of this Gospel would be brought to new life in Christ and clothed with power from on high.

As a lover of God, that's what I want for myself and as a pastor it's what I want for the congregation and community I serve. But there are times when my actions don't match my expressed desires: and the same is likely true for all gathered here.

Jesus is not always the subject and focus of our work and efforts. He is set aside or given a back seat to our various programs, plans, agendas and interests, many of which are noble and well-intentioned, which only serves to make them more dangerous because we content ourselves and those in our care with the merely good rather than the excellence that is knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection.

Part of this comes from our (again for the most part) well-intentioned desire to see the will of God done, or at least what we think is the will of God done. In the airport on Monday, we overheard a guy on a cell phone comment "That's not what God wants!" and we joked maybe we should grab this guy with a hotline to god and get some answers for ourselves. But then I stopped and thought of how many times I've done the same—so certain of what I think God wants that I'll do whatever necessary to make it happen rather than let the Holy Spirit work in me and the situation.

But if, as in Luke's works, Jesus is the subject, then we remember our place in the scheme of things and allow the Holy Spirit to direct us, instead of the other way around—allowing the Spirit to move when, where and how he chooses, freeing us and those in our care to simply know Christ.

The last verse of Luke's Gospel is a testament to that. It's not just an easy way to wrap up the story, but it calls our attention to the subject of the story and what the future holds. Here is held out hope, encouragement and joy, despite our anxieties, failings and frustrations. The last thing he records is the disciples praising God. Those who know Jesus and have experienced in body, mind and spirit the love, grace and life of Christ can do nothing but praise God.

The circumstances, strains, struggles and trials that are part and parcel of a life spent taking up our crosses and following Christ must not—no—cannot overshadow the joy of knowing Jesus, a joy that is offered to use as part of God's gracious gift of salvation.

The joy is evident in the life and works of St. Luke, because of his devotion to Christ. St. Luke's works call our attention from the distractions of life, both good and bad, back to Jesus and the life that we have in him. Today as part of this festival we have the privilege of knowing and experiencing Christ as he comes to us in the bread and the wine of the Eucharist.

What life, what joy, what blessing is ours as lovers and beloved of God! What a gift, strenuous though it might be at times, that we are called not just to experience for ourselves new life in Christ, but to share with others the gift of Christ in Word and Sacrament.

With the help of the Holy Spirit, may we follow the example of St. Luke, that Jesus would be the subject of all we say and do and live in his love and life now and forever.

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