

The Most Relevant Message

Luke 1:1-4

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ December 31, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

¹Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, ²just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, ³I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed. (Luke 1:1-4, NRSV)

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I've judged a few speech competitions over the years and I will tell you that there is one speech that will always receive low marks from me. It's the one where the speaker begins the speech by detailing for you how he or she came up with the idea for the speech in the first place. That never grabs me. Unless the assigned topic for the speech contest is "How to come up with a speech for the speech contest", I don't want to hear how you came up with what you have to say. I want to hear *what it is* you have to say.

That being said, I'm about to do what I have long criticized others for doing, and therefore I ask your forgiveness even as I'm about to do it.

Every six months or so I take a retreat for a few days to do some long range sermon planning, to think through the direction of my preaching for the next several months. This past November I snuck away to the coast for a few days that week to sketch out a plan for the new year. Usually ideas come easy to me. In fact, most times I head off to these retreats already having a direction in mind and then just spend my time away mapping it out. Not this time. I spent most of the first day stuck, not sensing any leading from the Spirit on a direction to go.

Part of the problem was that recently I've heard a lot of strong voices calling for preaching that is relevant and timely, and those voices were echoing in my head. Because we live in a time where there has been a lot of political and cultural upheaval, there are some, even in our own congregation, who have urged preachers like me to use the pulpit to directly address some of these issues. I have tried to carefully listen to those voices, at many points finding myself sympathetic as I have also wanted to find a way to speak truth and love and grace

and justice into all that we see unfolding around us in our nation and in our world. Ultimately, I have to agree with the premise that if our preaching is not relevant to our lives and to our world, then what good is it?

Finding myself at an impasse, I left my studies and went out for long walk along the water. Sometimes walking helps me think. For much of the walk I just enjoyed the silence and the solitude of the place. I was the only one around. I also prayed along the way, and at one point made this simple request, "Lord, I want my preaching to be relevant. Show me the direction you want me to go." I'm not sure my words were that articulate in the moment, but that was the gist of my prayer. And in response, this is what I heard. In that moment a clear sense came over me that the Lord was saying to me, "Jeff, what possibly could ever be more relevant than the gospel?" The answer to my prayer wasn't a statement, but a question. But immediately I had my answer. Nothing will ever be more relevant than the proclamation of the life and teachings, the death and resurrection, of Jesus Christ, God's only Son - what it is he has done for us, is doing for us, and has promised to do for us.

Paul's words to his apprentice Timothy come to mind from II Timothy 4:1-5:

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.¹

Preachers are sinners. Did you know that? If you didn't, that means you don't know any preachers very well. One thing this means is that preachers, like

¹ NRSV

everybody else, tend to talk about what they like to talk about and avoid talking about what they don't like to talk about. I've been guilty of that myself, even in the pulpit. So beginning this morning, and on into the new year, we are going to preach through the Gospel of Luke. We will begin in chapter four next week only because we've just spent time this Christmas in the birth narratives which make up the first three chapters. But after that, there will be no selective cherry-picking favorite passages and skipping over the hard or inconvenient ones. No, we're going to preach right through the Gospel, text by text. For one, it's a discipline that helps sinful preachers like me make sure that we are preaching what the Apostle Paul calls, "the whole counsel of God."²

Now, we may take breaks along the way, as the Spirit leads myself or the other pastors to focus our preaching on other texts for a Sunday or for a season, but then we will return back to Luke and continue to immerse ourselves in the life, work and teachings of the one we have declared is our Lord and Savior. For if Jesus truly is Lord and Savior, his actions and teachings are timeless, as relevant today as they were two thousand years ago.



The New Testament contains four Gospels, four separate accounts of the life and teachings of Christ. The third of these accounts is called the Gospel According to Luke. Truth is, however, we're not sure Luke, who was the traveling companion of the Apostle Paul, was actually the author. The author of the Gospel never reveals his name. The early church attributed the Gospel, and its companion book, Acts, to Luke but the best of modern scholarship remains inconclusive. For convenience sake, however, from here on out I'll refer to the author as Luke.

What we do know is that Luke was either an eyewitness to the events he records here or he was in direct connection with those who were eyewitnesses to those events. In other words, what we *don't* have here is a historian sitting down centuries later pouring over ancient documents written in long-forgotten script trying to piece together from a distance what actually happened. No, in fact every single book in the New Testament was written by either a direct eyewitness to the life and teachings of Christ or by somebody who was in direct communication with such eyewitnesses.

My family got the board game *Telestrations* for Christmas. Do you know this game? It's like that old game telephone, where you whisper a message around a circle from one person to another to see if the message can stay intact along the way. Except in *Telestrations* you use a combination of words and drawings to pass on the message. The results are equally entertaining because it's extremely rare that a message more than once or twice removed from its original source will stay intact. A wallflower becomes a man in a wall, becomes Han Solo, becomes a gangster. It's great fun.

However, keeping a message intact is not a game when the message you are trying to convey is the one message that has the power to transform the entire cosmos, the best news the world has ever received, the truth about who God is and what he has done in our world. That's not a game. You must get that message right. Therefore, it ought to give us great confidence to know that when we read Luke's Gospel, just as when we read the rest of the New Testament, we are reading the testimony of eyewitnesses which has been, for the most part, passed down to us in the original form, save for the translation from one language to another.

The preface to Luke's Gospel is in the style of classical rhetoric, bearing striking similarities to the prefaces found in the accounts of medical writers and historians in those days, others who were attempting to communicate a message that could be trusted.³ Specifically, Luke opens his letter reminding us that these accounts were "**handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.**" He also lets us know that he spent time "**investigating everything carefully from the very first [so as to] write an orderly account...**"

What would this investigation have looked like? Well, biblical scholars tell us that communities in ancient Palestine had official storytellers.⁴ Since there were no printed books, or newspapers, television or radio, villages appointed story tellers to preserve whatever collective history was worth preserving. When a major event would happen, within a day or two the story would make its way around the village and settle into a form everybody agreed was accurate. Then the story was entrusted to a few people, these story tellers, who had demonstrated that they were the ones who were best at remembering and retelling it. And that's exactly what they would do. They wouldn't change the story, of course, because if they did everybody would notice

² Acts 20:26-27 – "**Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.**"

³ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke – Interpretation Series* (John Knox, 1990), 15.

⁴ I'm particularly indebted to N.T. Wright for this insight, *Luke for Everyone* (Westminster John Knox, 2001), 2.

the change and set them straight. It's no different when I try to change a story that happened in my family, often times to put myself in a better light, and my wife and my kids won't let me get away with it. And in an oral culture, where people's minds were so far superior to our minds when it came to remembering things, the stories always stayed intact.

In fact, amazing displays of memory continue on in the Middle East even today while, at the same time, those of us living in the West, where everything is stored on computer chips and the internet and our smartphones, can't even remember our own phone number. Biblical scholar, Kenneth Baily, who lived in the Middle East for sixty years, was stunned at how even illiterate peasants knew by heart thousands and thousands of lines of proverbs and poetry. He tells of how he would regularly watch these peasants play a game where people would sit in a circle and the first person would recite two lines of poetry. The next person then had to use the last letter of the last line as the first letter for two other lines of poetry, and so on around the circle. Baily claims that he has witnessed this game go on many times around the circle before a single person is stumped or misquotes. Even the smallest mistake and you are out, and everyone knows when you have made a mistake.

Apparently, some Americans have tried to bring the game telephone to Middle Eastern communities and it never works. It's no fun because the message always makes it all the way around the circle completely intact. Middle Easterners don't get the point of the game.

Similarly in Jesus' culture, many Jews memorized the entire Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament, often by the age of twelve. Any student of any rabbi in those days was not to lose a drop from the cistern of his master's teaching. In other words, nobody was ever encouraged in any way to play fast and loose with the formal tradition of a teacher or with the founding principles of a community's life. These things were handled with extreme care and creative freedom was simply forbidden. You passed on what you received exactly as you received it, which means that the Gospel accounts we have before us today can be trusted as authentic. If anybody in those days had invented fictitious stories or teachings about a man named Jesus and then tried to pass them off as true, that person would have been met immediately with protest, shock and outrage.⁵

⁵ Arthur W. Lindsley, Senior Fellow, C.S. Lewis Institute, "Can the Gospels be Trusted", May, 2012, posted online at http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/Can_The_Gospels_Be_Trusted_FullArticle

What seems to have happened, therefore, was that Luke dedicated himself to going around these villages in Palestine in the second half of the first century and listening to the stories about Jesus from these accredited story tellers, those he calls "servants of the word". Because there were likely many others standing around in these villages listening in as these stories were retold to Luke, others who had also been there when these stories first took place, Luke knew that he was being put in touch with solid, reliable accounts from those who were eyewitnesses to the teachings and events which he was working so hard to order.

In the ancient world many people actually believed that there was a danger in writing things down. Five hundred years before Christ, Plato had said that he believed human memories were the best way to get things right and to pass them on. You can't tell where a book came from, but you can look a person in the eye.⁶ In some ways, that's still true. If you are going to tell me something important that is going to be difficult for me to believe, I don't want to read it in a text or an email. I want to look you in the eye as you tell me. But in Luke's day the story of the Gospel was beginning to spread out from Palestine and across the Roman Empire, to people in places who would never have the opportunity to meet those who were with Jesus and look them in the eye as they told recounted their testimony. By putting these things in writing, therefore, these far off communities, all the way down to us today, would have the chance to at least read those eyewitness testimonies for themselves.

The beauty of Luke's writing is that it not only covers the life and teachings of Christ but is also chocked full of Old Testament references and then goes on, in the book of Acts, to tell the story of the early church. That may make Luke the only New Testament writer who intentionally relates Israel, Jesus and the church to one another in a historical and theological way. He has done for us the hard work of sifting through all that was out there and then laying it all out, as he says, "**in an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us,**" so that we his readers can walk away with the whole picture in mind.

Did any of you watch the recent Ken Burns documentary on the Vietnam War? It's seventeen hours long, so it's not something you get through in one sitting. But if you did sit through it you know that the difficult and careful work that he and others did made it possible for viewers to now possess a broad and accurate picture of the events of that time. In essence, that's what Luke has done for us. In fact, if you've

⁶ Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, 2.

never done so, I'd encourage you to find a time to read through Luke's Gospel all in one sitting. It will take you about ninety minutes or so, but it will be well worth the time because once you come to see the whole story of the life and teachings of Christ, the different parts along the way will make much more sense to you in context.

You may have noticed that Luke's Gospel has a recipient, a "most excellent Theophilus." (I love the greeting! We should all refer to one another in a similar way.) As is the case for the author, we also don't know who Theophilus is. Some scholars believe he may have been the person who foot the bill for the publication of the Gospel, but we can't be certain. The only clue we are given is in verse 4 when Luke says that he is writing to Theophilus, **"so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed."**

Chances are that Theophilus was a new convert to Christianity, and that Luke was writing an account of the life and teachings of Christ so that Theophilus, and others like him, could be instructed as disciples in the faith. The root of the Greek word for 'instructed' here is the word '*katecheo*'. Some of you might recognize that word. It's where we get our word 'catechism', a word the church has long used to describe the process by which young disciples are trained up in the knowledge and life of the Christian faith. As you read through Luke's Gospel it becomes clear that he is not writing to defend the faith, as he would if he were writing to non-believers. He is writing to review the faith. Edification and education are his goals. He's not pressing his reader for a decision but for faithfulness, for Theophilus and the rest of us to continue to grow in grace.

This makes it the perfect book for the church – for us! – to explore and digest. In a way, Luke is inviting us to examine the account of Jesus' life and teachings, to dissect it and wrestle with it, even to scrutinize it. By the way, I hope you realize that this sort of thing isn't always encouraged in other religious traditions. Some of you, in fact, have come out of religious traditions where exploration and scrutiny are highly discouraged or even disallowed. There are, in fact, major religions in our day which have gone to great lengths to cover up much of their less-than-exemplary origins. And in some of these traditions, adherents are instructed to simply accept without question or deviation everything that the leadership declares is true.

I hope you understand that has never been the case with Christianity. We are practically invited by the Gospel writers themselves to hold up these testimonies to the strictest scrutiny. This church, like all churches, ought

to be a place where every question is welcome. Not every question can be answered, but every honest question still ought to be asked. We ought to dig into the scriptures, and into the history of their account. I encourage you to do so because I have come to believe that as long as your mind is open to whatever truth you find there, you will find the truth. Jesus himself encouraged his disciples to seek, to knock, to ask, knowing that those who do will be led to find the truth, to see doors opened for them, to have their questions answered.

Comedian and political pundit Bill Maher once said, "To most Christians, the Bible is like a software license. Nobody actually reads it. They just scroll to the bottom and click 'I agree.'" To be fair, I've listened to Bill Maher speak about the Bible and it's quite clear that he hasn't read the Bible either. Still, I'm afraid that in some cases he may have a point.

Let that never be true of us. We need to examine the scriptures carefully because, frankly, the implications are enormous. If the gospel is true, if Jesus actually is God who came as one of us, lived a perfect life, performed miracles, taught the things we have recorded, died for our sins, was physically raised from the dead, ascended to heaven, and reigns at present as the living Lord, if all this is true then the gospel has *infinite* relevance. If the gospel is not true, however, it has of zero relevance, a mere cultural phenomenon at best. And because of the nature of its claims, the gospel cannot be of moderate relevance. That option is not left open to us.

The Swiss philosopher, Rousseau, who wasn't even a Christian himself, once wrote, "The Gospel has marks of truth so great, so striking, so perfectly unique that the inventor would be more astonishing than the hero." As we receive the Gospel with open hearts and minds, even put it to the test, we will walk away convinced that it has the definite ring of truth.

What an extraordinary gift we have been given. What an extraordinary opportunity stands before us in the coming year. That our brother in Christ, whoever he was, went to such painstaking lengths to investigate everything so carefully, tracking down those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses to these things, so that an orderly account could be handed down all the way from Theophilus to us so that we, along with him, may know the truth about these things in which we have been instructed.

In the days to come, let us not neglect this extraordinary gift which has been given to us. Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Most everybody wants preachers to preach sermons that are relevant. In your view, what makes a sermon relevant?
2. Read Luke's prologue to his Gospel in Luke 1:1-4. What does the prologue tell us about what is to follow?
3. What do you think Luke wants Theophilus (and others like him) to get out of reading his 'orderly account'?
4. Do you have a high degree of trust in the authority and accuracy of the Gospel accounts? Why or why not?
5. Read Paul's words again in II Timothy 4:1-5. In what way is the message here relevant for our day?
6. Historian Paul Johnson once wrote, "Christianity is essentially a historical religion. It bases its claims on the historical facts it asserts. If these are demolished it is nothing." What do you think he means? Do you agree?
7. Do you feel like Faith Presbyterian Church is a congregation where everybody is encouraged to ask questions, no matter what the questions might be? If not, what questions are you hesitant to ask?
8. Is the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ the most relevant message for our time and for all times? Why or why not?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

How do we know that the things we read about Jesus in the Bible are true, that these things actually happened?