

## **Luke, Evangelist**

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

October 18, 2020

Luke 1:1-4; 24:44-53

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

If you ask somebody about the meaning of Christianity, fairly quickly they will say that it has something to do with Jesus. After all, the word Christianity contains the word “Christ.” Almost everything that we know about Jesus comes from the four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Today the church commemorates Luke, whose title, “Evangelist,” means gospel-writer. Today we’re going to talk about Luke’s book. But we should note that there is a second book, the Acts of the Apostles. And we should note that because a verse in Colossians names Luke as “the beloved physician,” he was thought to be a doctor, and so in church lore, Luke is the patron saint of doctors and healers and medicine. And many hospitals founded by churches are named “Saint Luke’s Hospital.” But today we’ll talk about the Evangelist Luke, and the gospel which bears his name.

Around the year 150, a Christian in the Roman empire, the son of a bishop, was excommunicated as a heretic. His name was Marcion. Marcion created a Bible. This was 200 years before the Bible as we know it took shape. Marcion’s Bible contained only eleven books. He completely rejected the entire Old Testament. Rejected the God of the Old Testament. And Marcion’s Bible consisted of ten letters of Paul, and the gospel according to Luke. So here’s this man who wants to reject the bulk of what we consider to be the Bible, and wants to narrow everything down. And he narrows it all down to Paul and to Luke’s gospel.

The illustrious historian and theologian Adolf von Harnack considered the heretic Marcion to be an early version of Martin Luther. I’m personally not sure if that’s fair or accurate to either man, but he is Harnack and I am only Springer. However, setting aside Luther himself, I do know many LutherANS who would be happy to have only Marcion’s Bible. Consider the things that Luke— and Luke alone— has shared with us about Jesus. Here are five: (1) The Christmas Eve story, with the shepherds, the angels, and the manger. (2) Those angels sing “Glory to God in the highest,” and that is one of four songs or canticles that Luke shares. The Magnificat, Zechariah’s song, and Simeon’s song, the *Nunc dimittis*. (3) The parable of the Good Samaritan. (4) The parable of the so-called Prodigal Son. (5) The importance of women, and special attention to Mary, the mother of Jesus. If we didn’t have Luke’s gospel, we wouldn’t have any of those things. And those things are the kinds of things that people cherish about the Christian religion. For so many, Luke’s gospel is really the emotional heart of our religion.

But Luke is also, frankly, the intellectual head of our religion. His gospel is the longest book in

the New Testament. Acts, which Luke wrote as a sequel, is the second longest book in the New Testament. In today's gospel reading, Luke declares: *Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you.* Luke is disclosing his place in the history of the early church. He was not an eyewitness, like Peter or James. Others have tried to describe what happened 50 years ago, when Jesus of Nazareth came down to Jerusalem. But Luke, having seen these other works— and what *are* those other works? Mark? Matthew? Some lost gospel? Luke says that after reviewing the literature, he has conducted his own investigation and has produced his own report. Which is written for the benefit of Theophilus, who could be a noble citizen. Or since Theophilus means “one who loves God,” you and I might be the intended readers. Lovers of God who seek to know him and his truth.

So Luke has produced a theological *tour de force*. At this time in my career, I have reached the sobering realization that what Paul's letter to the Romans sought to do with prose, Luke's gospel manages to accomplish with poetry. It's an uncomfortable thought for me— since I consider myself to be thoroughly Pauline— that the pupil, Luke, may have surpassed his teacher, Paul. The challenge at the heart of the New Testament is to balance Judaism with Christianity, to show why the God of Israel has offered his life and his mercy to all the world in Jesus Christ. It is difficult to affirm both Judaism and Christianity simultaneously. A feat which Paul accomplishes in Romans, his own *tour de force*. But that Luke may have accomplished with more power and beauty in his Gospel, touching both the mind and the heart of Theophilus and all others who come into contact with the Gospel According to Luke.

For me, Luke's gospel is his greatest achievement. For those of us who labor in the field of evangelism— proclaiming the good news that is in Jesus Christ— for those of us who engage in this work, Luke's success is undeniable.

I want to close with an explanation of the tetramorph. It's the background for how Luke is symbolized by an ox. In the opening verses of the prophet Ezekiel, the prophet has a vision of fire with four living creatures: a human being, a lion, an ox, and an eagle. It would be hard to draw such a thing, and one of the more amusing parts of Christian history is artists trying to depict some of the things in Ezekiel. These creatures have wings, and underneath the wings, human hands. This same set of creatures appears in the fourth chapter of Revelation, which borrows a lot of its material from Ezekiel. The four creatures operate as one creature, and this thing is sometimes called a tetramorph, which is Greek for four shapes. In Revelation and Ezekiel, it's intended to be some sort of creature which signifies the presence of God in much the same way that the Seraphim in the story of Isaiah signify the presence of God.

In Christian lore, the tetramorph has been used as a symbol of the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. That was not the meaning for Ezekiel or for Revelation. Indeed, we only ended up with four gospels in our Bible after three hundred years of discussion and debate.

Some smart Christians have thought the Bible should include two gospels, for example, or seven gospels. The consensus over centuries got us to the four that we have. And then these four creatures were associated with the four gospels. And even then, not everyone has unanimously agreed about which animal ought to symbolize which gospel. But the consensus and the tradition is that the ox represents Luke. In any event, in our sanctuary, we have kneeler cushions at the four corners of our altar: the eagle, the human, the lion, and the ox. So the tetramorph is in our sanctuary, symbolizing that the fullness of the good news of Jesus Christ is something that we aspire to achieve in the life and ministry of our congregation.

On this Saint Luke's day, may the good news live more fully in our midst. And may God's healing power touch each of us, and all of us, in the places where we hurt and are broken. Amen.

