



St. Luke the Physician

Luke the Evangelist

St. Luke is a gifted storyteller who wrote two of the major works of the New Testament, the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. In 52 chapters Luke masterfully takes the reader from the mists of antiquity all the way to a rented apartment in the empire's capital city and creates out of sometimes unlikely material an uncanny sense of historical movement.¹

Luke is more than a storyteller; he is also a historian. Though ancient history was written much differently than history is written today, Luke sounds surprisingly current and relevant in describing how he approached the writing of his gospel:

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, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.” Luke 1:1-4 NRSV

All that we know for certain of Luke comes from the pages of the New Testament. The ancient manuscripts attribute the gospel to a certain Luke, whom patristic writers unanimously identify as the companion of Paul. Luke is referred to in Paul's letters as the beloved physician who stayed with Paul to the end when most others had left him. (See Philemon 24; Col 4:14, 2 Tim 4:11.) It is also noteworthy to see that Luke writes some of Acts in first person plural, suggesting that he was present to witness those recorded events himself. (See Acts 16:10-17, 20:5-15; 21:8-18; 27:1-28:16.) Luke would have been traveling with Paul in the 50's and 60's AD, and is thought to have composed Luke-Acts sometime between 60 to 85 AD.

The ancient symbol that came to be used to represent Luke was the ox, because it signified sacrifice to the ancients, and Luke's gospel centers around the sacrifice of Jesus for the sins of the world.

¹ Adapted from the Anchor Bible Dictionary, ed. David Noel Freeman, Doubleday, 1992, vol. IV, p. 405.

Following the Example of St. Luke
A Meditation on the Life and Work of St. Luke

Feast of St. Luke Oct 18, 2015 by Kent Walley

Sometimes things in our lives can be repeated so often that we hardly pause to think about them and they can become like wallpaper to our lives -- we come to take them for granted. When Hurricane Sandy hit, the rectory was without power for two weeks. It reminded us how important electrical power is to our lives. We don't think about having power until we lose it. I go to Guatemala, and I am reminded of the privilege I have, that I hardly ever think about, of having fresh clean drinking water. Or how often do we pause to think about the air we breathe and lungs to breathe that air with?

How many times have you heard or read that passage? Can you just about quote it to me verbatim? "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor... to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

I wonder if we in the church don't sometimes take for granted the gospel stories we have of Jesus. Have you ever stopped to marvel that we have them? We read them in church every Sunday, year in, year out. We know some of the stories very well, like angels appearing to shepherds on Christmas Eve; even Linus on the *Peanuts Christmas Special* knows that one.

Where do those stories come from? We have those in our Bible, but how did they get there? We just assume such stories are there, and it can become like wallpaper that we hardly notice, because we are so familiar with reading and hearing them.

Today we celebrate the church's Feast Day of St. Luke the Evangelist. He is the one for whom our parish, St. Luke's, is named. Perhaps we take him for granted also -- how much really do you know about Luke? Did you know that if it wasn't for Luke, Linus would have had nothing to say -- that story of Jesus' birth, angels, and shepherds only appears in the Gospel of Luke? In fact there are several stories of Jesus that we have today, because Luke chose to include them in his Gospel. Only in Luke do we find the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, for just a couple of examples.

So who was Luke? We don't know a lot about him. Tradition holds that the Gospel of Luke and the Sequel: Acts of the Apostles -- two major books of the New Testament--were compiled by the physician who traveled with the Apostle Paul in the first century. Paul calls him Luke, the beloved physician, in Colossians 4:14. He was probably from Syria and quite possibly one of the earliest non-Jewish converts to Christianity.

We don't know exactly how Luke the physician and the Apostle Paul met. We might suppose that Luke was going about his work as a physician, a young professional in the ancient world, when one day he is called to help a new patient and his life changes forever. This is a most unusual patient because he had been notorious for traveling the world to promote the killing and imprisonment of Christians; then one day, caught in a brilliant light on the road to Damascus, he hears the voice of Jesus. He becomes a Christian and the very one who persecuted Christians then goes around preaching Christianity throughout the region. We don't really know how Luke met up with Paul. Maybe it was after Paul had been dragged outside a city and stoned, but survived. Maybe it was because of some malady from one of Paul's stays in a moldy, dark, old prison cell, in rusty shackles. It might have been because of Paul's poor eyesight. We don't know, but maybe someone simply introduced them, and Luke found Paul interesting. But for whatever reason, Luke begins traveling with Paul, and assisting him. We might say that Luke was Paul's personal physician.

It is interesting to note that Luke was not an Apostle, not one of the first eyewitnesses of Jesus Christ, but he is an eyewitness to some of the ministry of Paul which is recorded in the later chapters of Acts. It seems that he may have even kept a diary of sorts, because several sections of Acts are written in first person plural – "From there we set sail to Troas..."

Though medicine was far different in Biblical times, and the way we do science hadn't even been invented yet, we see the makings of a scientist in Luke. He observes carefully many details in his Gospel and in Acts. For example, in his account of Jesus feeding the 5000, Luke tells us that they sat down in groups of 50. And Luke tells the reader that he is taking a very careful approach at the beginning of his Gospel that we read a moment ago. He says that he set about to write an orderly account, consulting with those who were eyewitnesses. He says he investigated everything carefully. He sounds not only very precise and scientific, but even something like an investigative reporter. Perhaps this physician was so intrigued by Paul's gospel message and the miraculous things happening as he traveled with Paul that he sought to find out for himself what the eyewitnesses of the early church were saying.

Now it is certainly true that the way people wrote history and did science then was very different from what it is now – but nevertheless listen again to how Luke describes what he is doing – hear how modern it sounds: "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 most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed."

Luke is mentioned by Paul in three of his epistles, most notably in 2 Timothy 4:11, where Paul writes of his coming death, and how many of Paul's companions had gone elsewhere, and that "only Luke is with me." Luke was loyal to

the end, staying with Paul just before his martyrdom. Paul was crucified by the Roman Emperor Nero around 67, and it is assumed that after that, Luke sets out to write his orderly account. Many believe Luke's gospel to have been written sometime in the 70's or 80's AD. And it seems his Gospel was very well-received and widely circulated. Within just a few years, many are acknowledging that Luke, the physician who traveled with Paul and interacted with Apostles and other eyewitnesses, wrote this account.

In 96AD Clement of Rome quotes gospel sayings from Luke's Gospel in one of his letters. By 140 one of the very first lists of books for what would become the New Testament, those books thought to be genuinely representing the eyewitness Apostolic witness, was compiled. It is called the Muratorian Canon and it includes the Gospel of Luke. Around 150 Justin Martyr quotes from Luke's Gospel, and by then the four gospels were already bound together in one book and were circulating. This is quite remarkable in a world without mass communication and easy ways to copy manuscripts. By 180AD the church father, Irenaeus, defends the fourfold gospel witness, which obviously includes the Gospel of Luke. You may have heard or read that the final decision about what books would be included in the New Testament wasn't made until the 400's, and this is true. But the books that were chosen to be included then were chosen because of their universal and unanimous acceptance as having a clear and direct connection to the eyewitnesses and the Apostles themselves. The Gospel of Luke appears early, and all traditions surrounding it point to Luke the physician as its author. The authorship of the Gospel of Luke and Acts was never questioned in the ancient church. We have no record of a single person making an accusation that someone else wrote it, well not in the early church that is...the first accusation didn't come about until some 1700 years later in the 19th century.

The Gospel of Luke and Acts were believed from the first to be written by the traveling companion of Paul, Luke the Physician. And the author clearly tells us his purpose – so that we may know the truth concerning Jesus Christ – from reliable accounts of eyewitnesses.

What does all of this have to do with the people of New Jersey in the 21st century at the parish that bears St. Luke the Evangelist's name? We ask ourselves this morning: what can we learn from the example of Luke, the beloved and faithful physician that God raised up to write these two important books of our New Testament?

I would suggest four things— four ways— that we can follow Luke's example:

Loyalty, Compassion, and Friendship – Luke stayed with Paul when all the others had gone. He sat with a dying man – ailing and awaiting his death sentence. Might it be said of us that we are people who would stay with and tend to the sick. Who might God be calling you to be a friend to through a difficult time?

Healing -- Luke as a physician notes as do the other gospel writers that Jesus did many miraculous healings. Jesus came to announce that the Kingdom of God had come through Him, and one could see this was true in the healing that he did. In a parish named for a physician and that follows Jesus Christ we too should seek to bring the healing love of God to others in word and action. A new step in that direction will begin tonight at 5PM. On the third Sunday of the month we will offer a healing prayer service and Eucharist at St. Luke's.

Appreciation of the Bible -- Today as we celebrate St. Luke the Evangelist, we are reminded of the invaluable contribution he made to Christianity by recording many parables and stories that the other gospel writers left out. Look around this church this morning. Our stained glass windows each depict a passage from the Gospel of Luke -- all but one -- the visit of the Magi is found only in Matthew, but as we have noted, only in Luke do we find the much loved and cherished stories of angels and shepherds at Bethlehem, the prodigal son and the Good Samaritan. Luke wrote that people might know the truth about Jesus. In Scripture in Luke and Acts we have an opportunity to learn from Jesus ourselves. Reading and seeking Jesus Christ as we read God's word should never be taken for granted. So many people living in our world today do not have access to a Bible, some not to a Bible in their language. What a privilege it is to live in an era where anyone can afford a book, and the Bible is readily available. Will we celebrate this privilege by seeking God through reading His Word regularly or will we allow this precious book to sit on a shelf or table gathering dust?

Share the good news. Luke is called St. Luke the Evangelist, because in a very real sense it is principally because of him and Matthew, Mark, and John that we are here today. Without their faithfulness to research, interview, organize, and painstakingly compile, by hand, without computers, typewriters, copiers or even white out -- they preserved the testimony about Jesus so that those who come after them would know. Can you imagine not knowing the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, not knowing the Christmas story? Luke put in this effort; he wrote so that Theophilus would know, so that others would know, so that the people of St. Luke's church would know the truth about Jesus Christ. If Luke was so zealous to share the stories of the Love of Jesus with someone called Theophilus, shouldn't we be willing, every now and then, to find ways to share Jesus' love in deed and also in word with those around us who have yet to hear and comprehend -- that love transcends racial boundaries, even with Samaritans, that God's love welcomes home even the wayward prodigal with open arms, and that the child celebrated by glorious angels and humble shepherds entered our world not in a royal palace but in a humble manger.

Thanks to Luke – we know these precious stories of good news – and now it's our turn. Who might someday say thank God, for the people of St. Luke's, thank God for you because you were the one who introduced me to the stories of Jesus and the good news of God's love.

To Him Be the Honor Glory Power and Praise now and forever. AMEN.



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