

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us,² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.³ Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4)

The Gospel Begins with Telling

In September, I heard a presentation by a religious writer. He made a statement that really bothered me. He said, “Don’t trust the word. Trust the story.” Now, for a whole host of reasons, that’s not a sound way to work with the Word of God. But he did have a point that I think is worth remembering: God chose to reveal the work of Christ in a narrative – a story, if we can use that word without implying a bedtime story or something that isn’t true. God told us about the events of Christ’s life and in the wider view, of the history of the people of Israel and then of the people of the New Testament Church. He did tell a story. That’s not all he did. He also gave us poetry and letters and discussions of doctrine and practice and lots of other things. But the gospel does come down to what Jesus did and what that means for us. There is a sense in which it’s our job to tell that story. This year during Advent, we’re using a series called “The Beginning of the Gospel.” We will look at the opening words of three different New Testament books and how God uses those beginnings to tell the story of the coming of Christ. Tonight, we’re studying the opening verses of the Gospel of Luke. We want to focus on how Christ comes into our hearts through that story. In that sense, **the gospel begins with telling.**

I.

So God handed his message down to us. In these opening verses of Luke, we have a glimpse into how the earliest Christian churches worked. Luke says, **“Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.”** When Luke wrote these words, the New Testament wasn’t finished. Some of Paul’s letters were written. The gospel of Mark was done and maybe the gospel of Matthew. But most it was still coming. And other people – Luke says “many” – were stepping in to fill in the void. Who were these other writers? Primarily, they were people like me, pastors or teachers or missionaries who wanted to tell who Jesus was and what he had done. Some of them were eyewitnesses of Jesus’ work. Others may have come to faith later. All of them recognized that Christian people need to know the story. They need at least the outline of Jesus’ life and work.

Those other writers were like me in one more way: their work was not inspired. Now, notice, I said “inspired” not “inspiring.” I hope that my messages are inspiring at least once in a while. I show you Jesus and relate how his life and death and resurrection cure your heart of the sorrow and guilt of sin. I have to give God all the credit, since he works through the gospel and he gives pastors the gifts they have, but I can hope that my ministry does inspire you. I cannot hope that my sermons will be *inspired*. That means something totally different. It means that the Holy Spirit breathed into the mind and heart of the writer the very words of God.

Matthew, Mark and Paul were inspired. Most of the other pastors and teachers and missionaries of Luke’s day – just like all pastors and teachers and missionaries today – were not. Rather, we take the word God has given us and we do our best to proclaim it to you. All that I do and say must be based on those inspired words that God gave, and in that sense I can even say I proclaim the Word of God. And God does work through those weak human efforts. He gives and strengthens your faith. It is a miracle that God works through our telling. But it’s a different miracle than when he gave us the inspired word, the word that guides and rules all our telling. That word truly is the Word of God.

God decided that his people needed more than just the gospels of Matthew and Mark. So just like he would do still later with John, God inspired Luke to tell the story of Jesus. Now, Matthew and Mark cover much of the same ground, although each one does have a unique perspective. John later would give us a very different look at Jesus. Luke is halfway in between. He covers much of the same ground as Matthew and Mark, but when he does, almost always, he tells the story from a different point of view. He often uses different language and he describes the events in a different order. And he includes a great deal of material not covered in any other book. Without Luke’s gospel, we would not know about John the Baptist’s parents or the way he

leaped for joy in his mother's womb. We would not have Mary's conversation with the angel Gabriel or her wonderful song of praise or the description of the Holy Spirit coming on her so that she conceived. And the description of the baby's birth in Bethlehem and the angels telling the shepherds in the fields nearby are things that the Holy Spirit gave to us only through Luke. And we could multiply the examples.

Sometimes, we Christians struggle with the differences between the gospels. Every book of the Bible is inspired. God is the true author. Yet, all those books read differently. Why? Sometimes we say that God wrote in the style of the human author. But does that mean that some part of the writings of Luke or of Matthew or of Isaiah is really human? Is there a "God part" and a "human part"? And if there is, do we need to sift through and separate God's Word from Luke's writing? Should we trust the general story, but not trust every word? The answer is no. God carefully chose the men who wrote. He gave them the very words they were to use. Perhaps I can make it clearer by an illustration. Do you know what calligraphy is? It's fancy writing. Some people dabble. They have a few pens and they do a nice job. But some people are true artists. They make beautiful signs that get framed and sold. They often have large sets of pens, each with a special tip. The artist knows exactly what kind of mark each tip will make and he or she carefully chooses the tip to make the word or the stroke that matches the image in their mind. A really advanced calligrapher might even make their own tips because they want to make truly unique strokes and letters. That's what God did. He conceived of a message and he carefully constructed the tips – the men who wrote the Bible – so that the message would read exactly as he conceived it. And then he picked them up and wrote with them. He inspired them.

II.

He did all that so that Christ might come into our hearts. God wants us to trust in him and live forever. **The gospel begins with telling. God tells us the gospel so that we have the certainty of Christ.** That's what Luke says. He was writing to a man named Theophilus. Now, we don't know much about him. Most likely, he was a gentile, because the book of Luke constantly stops and explains Jewish customs. Clearly he was a Christian. Luke wrote to him so that he would "know the certainty" of the things he had been taught.

Now, we all know that certainty can be annoying, right? We all know somebody who's certain that they are always right and we hate listening to them pontificate. In fact, we might even be tempted to argue with them just because we want to prove them wrong. Unfortunately, that kind of egotistical certainty has religious manifestations. Lots of pastors aren't much more than blowhards. They spew forth nonsense as if God himself were speaking and they make people feel frustrated and angry. That has caused terrible problems for the church today. Our society – and even the visible church in our society – has very little patience for doctrinal truth because of people like that. But that arrogance is not what God had in mind when he had Luke write about certainty here. God was not talking about our egos. He was not inviting us to a pride-filled "I'm right and you're wrong" kind of Christianity. Rather, God was offering us a kind of certainty that brings peace and comfort in a troubled world.

Luke was a doctor in an age that didn't know anything about germs and that worked with very limited anesthesia. The Romans did amazing things with the medical science they had to work with, but Luke saw what sin does to us in this world. He knew – the way only an eyewitness to suffering can know – that we need comfort and peace in this world. God's answer to that suffering is Christ. In him, the Son of God entered our world of pain and sorrow to set us free. Jesus lived not as a king, but as the son of a carpenter. Luke shows us Christ standing with us here. And he shows him dying and rising to free us from all that pain and sorrow. He shows us Christ promising us a new and better life. And Luke wanted Theophilus and us to have the certainty that those promises are true.

But Luke wanted Theophilus and us to have more than that. He understood that God gives us more than just certainty of a better life. God gives us certainty of forgiveness. Jesus came to undo what sin does to us. So that does include the hurts and sorrows of life. But sin does even worse things to us than that. Sin makes us guilty before God. Jesus came to set us free from death and hell because those things are God's punishment for our sin. And God wants us to have the certainty of that forgiveness. Again and again, we run into the problem of guilt. I often see Christians who are tormented by guilt. When I tell them that God forgives them, they sometimes say things like, "I hope so." But they beat themselves up over all their sins, real and imagined. They cannot let go of the feeling that they deserve to be punished and that God's wrath is coming. Jesus came to set those people free – to set you free when guilt torments you.

But even more often, I meet people who don't understand that they are truly guilty. They've convinced themselves that they're good people and God isn't going to hold their little failures against them. It's become very common for people to apologize by saying, "I made a mistake." A mistake? A mistake is when you don't see a stop sign and your breeze through it. A mistake is when you get confused about the date and miss your anniversary. There's a huge difference between a mistake and deliberate selfishness. You're too wrapped up in yourself to remember your anniversary or you schedule something that you really want to do on that day and figure that you'll make it up later. You hit the gas when the light is turning red and you cause an accident because you weren't willing to wait. That's more than a mistake; it's sin.

We are all guilty of that kind of sin. But Jesus came to free us from our guilt. To be free, we have to admit our guilt. But once that guilt is out there in the open, God wants us to have the certainty that Jesus died and he paid for that sin. God wants us to know that Jesus rose and he wiped that sin away. God doesn't want us to spend our lives beating ourselves up. He wants us to rejoice because we know that he still loves us and nothing can ever change that. He wants us to have peace because Jesus is and always will be our Savior.

The only way for us to have that certainty is through the gospel. The gospel is the very power of God. It reaches into our hearts and gives us peace. That's why God inspired Luke to write. That's why God called men like me to stand up here and preach. God built his power into the Word, even that word I repeat and even though I am not inspired. Through that word about Christ, Jesus comes into our hearts and gives us peace and certainty. And it all begins with telling. Amen.