

## CHRISTMAS AS THE GOSPELS SEE IT – AN ORDERLY ACCOUNT

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Luke 1:1-25

Doctors are methodical souls, cautious, inquisitive, curious. They want to follow a trail from beginning to end. How did things start? What did you first notice? Have things gotten better or worse? Getting a patient's history is crucial to making a correct diagnosis. Which is why this is one of the first things they teach a doctor. How well a doctor listens and puts together the story makes a big difference in the patient's healing.

Luke, the gospel writer, hears a story like a doctor listens. It is a story of salvation (which in Hebrew means healing). And so it is a story about the healing of the nations and the casting out of demons, and the restoration of the creation. It's a story about God and about how things started and where they are headed, diagnostically speaking.

Luke displays a kind of ordered approach to history and events and his writing style, vocabulary, and interests are betrayed by what he hears and sees as opposed to what the other gospel writers notice. And it's because of the way in which he orders his story that leads to the presumption that he was a physician, an idea that dates back to at least the time of Jerome in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.

Take for instance the fact that there are more healing stories in Luke than in the other gospels. Healing is a crucial piece of evidence for Luke who looks to Jesus as one who can summon the powers of heaven to do what the powers of earth cannot.

When I was a student at Union I spent a summer at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in Clinical Pastoral Education, and I entered the hospital each day through a door near the chaplain's office, which had carved into it the words, "For of the most High cometh healing," the words of Ecclesiasticus 38.2. Luke knew that truth, and saw it as evidence of the power and authority summoned by Jesus.

Luke is the only non-Jewish writer of a gospel, and his sophisticated and refined writing style betrays a Harvard or Yale pedigree or its ancient equivalent.

He describes what he is trying to do at the outset of the gospel. Luke's words...

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.

(Theophilus, incidentally is translated literally, "Lover of God.") So maybe this is Luke's friend, or maybe this is all of us who are Luke's friends and therefore Lovers of God.

Luke's purpose is to set down what he calls an *orderly account* and to do so from a perspective that is uniquely Luke's. Mark, you'll remember could care less about birthing babies. He has no report to give us about the place and circumstances of Jesus' birth. Jesus walks onto the scene of history in Mark's gospel a full-grown man ready to be baptized by dunking in the Jordan. Not an infant baptism, mind you, but a full body and full confession experience.

Matthew, as we discussed last week sees kingdoms clashing in his gospel and he tells a story of the power of God set against the power of the Empire. There's a lot of judgment in Matthew's gospel. He sees things in black and white terms. He wants to know whose side you're on. There are choices to be made, from Matthew's perspective, and those choices have consequences.

Luke by comparison, among the synoptic gospels is full of stories about reconciliation and peacemaking, healing, and more than any of the other gospel writers he notices the women who play a key role in the faithful community. It's in Luke's gospel that we hear the story of the healing of the Widow's son, the story of the widow's mite, the woman who implores the unjust judge at midnight, and it's the women in Luke's gospel who bring the first report of the empty tomb to the apostles. An account that the men dismiss as an idle tale, thus making a kind of back handed case for the clarity and truth borne by the women among Jesus' closest disciples.

Luke *is* interested in birthing babies, in fact his gospel has not one but two birth narratives, one about John the Baptist and one about Jesus of Nazareth.

From the beginning of his gospel he is interested in portraying a Jesus born with Davidic birthmarks, a child whom angels will herald and sing in chorus on the night of his birth.

He will be linked with Bethlehem, the hometown of David and he will be welcomed by shepherds, also like David, but a linkage with no rank or station, for shepherds were the lowliest of people, bearing no prestige or honor, no royal claim or Levitical caste, not even trusted in court as witnesses in that time; their sworn testimony considered to be unreliable. Instead, Jesus is the son of an *anawim*, a poor woman, and a father whose paternity test delivered by an angel puzzles not only the town gossips but even himself.

From the very outset of the gospel, peace is a major theme in the story. It is laced in and out of the account that Luke remembers. Think for instance of Zechariah's words, offered as a blessing at the birth of his son John, of baptizing fame.

“By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”<sup>1</sup>

And remember the words Luke recalls the angel chorus sang to the shepherds the night of Jesus' birth? The inspiration for many a carol. “Glory to God in the highest heaven,” they sang in perfect harmony, “and on earth peace among those of good will!”

But with all this tenderheartedness, honoring women, seeking peace, pointing to Jesus' healing gifts, Luke does not in any way neglect the political situation in which Jesus is born.

Remember how he describes the setting of Jesus' birth? It is during the reign of Emperor Augustus who is fiddling with the tax laws, a taxation incidentally that is probably more a means of getting Joseph and Mary out of Nazareth for the night than it is a historical note to add to our factual evidence. No historian of the time, except Luke remembers any taxation at all. His earnest point is to connect Jesus to David through the little town of Bethlehem, from whence the messiah hails.

It is Luke who also reminds us of Quirinius who was Governor of Syria, and of Pontius Pilate who would play a key role later in the story. He invokes the name of Philip, ruler of Ituraea and Trachonitis, Annas and Caiaphas, high priests in those days, a powerful array of earthly opposition.

But if there are all these complications, these chaotic and disorderly powers set against God's power, there is also a story, an orderly account, that Luke wants us to hear about a Messiah heralded by angels and predicted by prophets who would draw heaven and earth closer together.

There is, after all, a kind of blending of heaven and earth in Luke's orderly account. He is the kind of doctor who you could imagine looking through a microscope and who sees more than living cells. One whose eyes see the hand of God and the intentions of a Creator that mean well for the earth and intends good will to all people.

There is so much static in the world these days, so much disruption of reflective thought. Counting down the time until the bombs go off. Brother Vladimir running for President for yet one more term (I wonder how that will turn out?) In a world of fake news, where it is hard to discern the truth,

someone anonymously makes an accusation that they have been aggressed, some boundary uncommunicated has been trespassed and who is there to deny it when it is false? Static everywhere disrupts our attention and steals our thoughts.

Everything seems to be breaking down. We none of us know what the rules are anymore because chaos has become one of the ways to maintain political power. Just change the subject and say or do something outrageous or insulting, or character damaging and you survive one more day. What a disordered and confusing time in which to live!

How do any of us make sense of our world any more, especially when the powers of evil and chaos seem to be pitted so strongly against the powers of God? Maybe that's why Luke does what he does, because he was living, as are we, in a time where chaos reigned and authority was breaking down, and truth was heard as falsehood. So Luke decided "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's *orderly account* is written against the backdrop of a world of disorder, almost as chaotic and crazy as ours, maybe even more so. A world where faithful people were asking questions about God and taxes and the right thing to do,

a world in which people who have nothing were having even what they had taken away,

a time when people wondered whether a widow's mite was worth two hoots in the great scheme of things,

and what to read into it when it appeared that the temple itself was falling down even from the inside out,

what hope and what sense there was for a world that would take the best and most self-denying, just and good man anyone had ever known and crucify him on a cross.

It was a world where evil was seditious and nothing seemed to be right or just anymore. A world an awful lot like ours.

In the midst of that time. In the midst of a world that was losing its soul, Luke decided to write an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, so that we might know the truth concerning the things about which we have been instructed." A story that begins in the darkness of night, when an angel heralds the birth of a child to be born who will save his people.

There is a story at the end of Luke's gospel, for some people the most dear and encouraging post resurrection story of them all. A story of two travelers on an obscure road, who are trying to make sense of the events that they have experienced. The road, as the story unfolds, is the road to Emwas, or as we say in English, Emmaus. It is a road, incidentally, that has never been found, never properly located archaeologically, and so, I suppose, it could be the road to just about any place.

Cleopas and another traveler are joined on their way by someone vaguely familiar who listens to their story of disappointment and grief.

"We had hoped," they said, "that he was the one to redeem Israel, this Jesus of Nazareth"

And this becomes a cue for the Stranger who travels with them to explain to them, beginning with Moses and the prophets, an orderly account of all the things about himself found in the scriptures.

The travelers invite the Stranger to break bread with them and share a meal, and as he breaks the loaf their eyes are opened and they see him for who he is and he disappears from their sight.

You may ask, "But what does this have to do with Advent, in this season of preparation when we look for the Lord to come to us?"

Well, it's a story that reminds us that the world is more alive with God than we may realize and that it is often when the world seems most chaotic, and despair seems the most reasonable emotion, exactly at the time we are ready to give up, when the worst seems to be the norm, precisely at that time is when God is most likely, as well as most needed, to come to us, and does so in a way in which the familiar is transformed into the extraordinary, even in an orderly account.

A couple of weeks ago I watched on television the lighting of the Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree, the annual extravaganza where people from out of town mostly, gather to watch a cavalcade of entertainers dance and sing and eventually light the Christmas Tree at 30 Rock.

And this year, like all the others, the tree was bigger, the lights more numerous, the gaudy display of colors and dazzle on the surrounding buildings was more than ever before. Except that I noticed something that I don't think I have ever put together in quite the same way.

The stage where the entertainers were dancing and singing was at the East End of the Promenade of Rockefeller Center, or so it seemed, rather than at the West end of the plaza where the skating rink and the tree are located.

And if you knew what you were looking at, I mean looked beyond the colors and the dazzle and the sprays of light that were thrown on all the buildings you could see that the building on the left, across Fifth Avenue, most distant from the tree and the skating rink and set apart from all the very expensive jewelry stores and ritzy hotels and Saks Fifth Avenue... set apart from them all was St. Patrick's Cathedral, silently, quietly, passively present amidst all the Holly Jolly Christmas being celebrated across the street.

And there you have it, Luke's orderly account set over and against the world's disorder and material excess. Christmas expressed in two very different ways juxtaposed on opposite sides of the Avenue. On the one hand the skating rink, the tree with 50,000 LED lights, weighing over 12 tons, seen by 500,000 people a day, the very epitome of the indulgence we make of Christmas, the holly jolly merry season located among the most expensive line of stores in midtown Manhattan, celebrating all the excess and commercialism and material things that the world can offer on the one side of the street, while on the opposite side is the High Altar of St. Patrick's Cathedral where the body of Christ is broken for us day and night, night and day, every day, quietly present to witness to the fact that God is quietly with us in the world, there to be seen by the eyes of faith for those who look to such things, making an orderly account of God's love for us, poured out in the cup, broken in the bread, and there in every time and season present in word and sacrament and prayer.

Luke wanted us to have an orderly account of the work of One who out-lived and out-loved us all. Quietly present in the life of the man from Galilee who joins us on our way, and who is the Savior of the World.

I don't think we have any idea any more how present God is in this insanely fake, and rude, and chaotic world. No idea whatsoever. Except when from time to time we look, and see, as did Luke, the One who is already there meeting us on our way, if we will only notice what is right in front of us.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:78-79