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East Liberty Presbyterian Church
December 11, 2011 (Third Sunday of Advent)
Luke 1:1-4
“Gospel Introductions: Orderly Accounts”

A blank sheet of paper is handed to you and you are told to write down the story of Jesus Christ, as you understand it and have been taught it. How many of you would quickly hand the paper back and say “No, thanks. I don’t think I’m up to this task”? Four gospel writers accepted this very challenge. Matthew began by reciting Jesus’ genealogy, setting the story of Christ in history. Mark jumped in with the story of John the Baptist who, like us, prepares the way for Christ. Luke was the only one to pause briefly at the beginning of his gospel story to provide a formal literary introduction. He modeled it after the classic historians of Greek culture. Some very important information is contained in those opening verses, including something quite obvious, which is this: Luke was not writing fiction. He wasn’t making this stuff up. In this day and age of doubt and skepticism, it is important to say quite clearly: What Luke wrote about really happened.

Who was Luke? First, he was someone who was a very good writer of the Greek language and, second, someone who did not include a lot of Hebrew words or quotes from the Old Testament. Those two details point to Luke being someone active in the Greek-speaking world beyond Israel around the Mediterranean Sea. Next, Luke evidently had access to some early versions of other gospels, including Mark’s gospel. And because Luke includes specific details about a time when the temple was destroyed and how the Jewish people were persecuted, it is likely that he is writing *after* the Roman destruction of the Jerusalem temple in the year 70. So picture the apostles and other disciples who witnessed Jesus’ death and resurrection sometime between the years 30 and 33; and imagine them telling the gospel story to people born just after those dates, who were part of the churches established by Paul and others, who then grew up to be Christian leaders telling their children about Jesus Christ. Luke is probably an educated young man in that third-generation group, writing around the year 80, committed to doing historical research to put together an orderly account about the good news of Christ and of Christ’s followers in the church.

Something prompted Luke to write his gospel, to take that blank sheet of paper and begin to write Jesus’ story. About ten years ago, my mother noticed that her children and grandchildren did not know a lot of the details about our family history. So she got my father to talk about his time on a Liberty Ship in the Merchant Marine at the end of World War II, and wrote down his stories as well as her own life history, adding in some photographs, and had copies made of these documents for all the kids and grandkids. She knew that one day she wouldn’t be around to tell the stories herself and there were things she wanted us to know and remember. What my mother did reminds me of something that the author V.S. Naipaul once said, when he commented that in India, when an old person dies, people say that “a library has burnt down.”¹

When Luke sat down to write his gospel, he was fully aware that the passing years meant the events of Jesus' life were slipping farther and farther back toward a distant horizon. Eyewitnesses were no longer alive; and the number of stories being told, parables being repeated, and descriptions of Jesus' life being shared were multiplying rapidly. Some were welcome flowers in the garden of faith; others were unhelpful weeds and tangled vines of flawed theology. So someone needed to get Jesus' story down on paper, clearly, succinctly, faithfully.

Luke had a lot of information to sort through. We can be grateful that he did not tell the gospel story like eight-year olds telling you about the latest Disney movie they just saw, excitedly giving you every detail of every scene: this happened, and then this happened, and then this crazy thing happened; until you give him a cookie to stop the story or send her outside to play. And we can be grateful that Luke was not a long-winded narrator notorious for telling rambling stories that take forever but never get anywhere. (If this were a Baptist church, I'd have you turn to your neighbor and say, "I know someone like that.") In one of Mark Twain's travel novels (*Roughing It*), Twain was tricked into going to a local bar to find a man named Jim Blaine, and, after Blaine's had a few drinks, ask him to tell the story of his grandfather's stubborn old ram. Twain did so, and Blaine began talking about how his grandfather got this ram from a man named Yates, who was related to Sarah Wilkerson, who could lift a barrel of flour as easy as others could flip a flapjack, who lived near a widow named old Miss Jefferson who was a good soul that would lend her glass eye to Miss Wagner whenever Miss Wagner had company, but she rarely got the eyeball in the right way which only scared the children; not to mention that she was bald and would have to borrow Miss Jacob's wig, who was the wife of the coffin-maker, who was a man no one liked because he used to hang around your house if anyone fell ill... Soon the liquor made Blaine fall asleep, and Twain's friends began laughing out loud, because they knew that no one had ever, ever heard what happened to Jim Blaine's old ram in all the years they'd been asking him to tell that story.

Now aren't you glad that God put Luke, and not Jim Blaine or someone like him, in charge of composing an orderly account of the gospel of Jesus Christ? Luke knew that a lot of information was out there concerning Jesus, but there was a basic story that needed to be told. There was a core history that needed to be put down on paper, so it could be read aloud in worship and shared with new believers and old believers alike. That was true then and it remains true today.

Now think for a second: Could you summarize the core message of the Christian faith in one or two sentences? What would you say? If your child or your friend or a co-worker struggling with faith asked you why they should read the gospel, what would you say? (If this were a Baptist church, someone would be shouting out, "Make it plain, preacher.")

The core message of faith is this: Jesus Christ was born, lived, suffered and died on the cross, was raised from the dead, all for our salvation: the fulfillment of God's covenant to heal and restore all of creation now and forevermore. That's the heart of what Luke wrote. That's the good news in the gospel. Someone in Luke's community evidently needed to hear that message – someone named

Theophilus, whose very name means “lover of God.” This person had been learning about Jesus. Perhaps he was a new convert, a catechumen, moving towards baptism and full entry in the church. For Theophilus, Luke wrote these words: *I decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.*

“That you may know the truth.” That phrase is bound to set off alarms in our modern, skeptical minds. In this day of political spin and conflicting media accounts, we get nervous when someone says that they want to tell us the truth, the real story. And in our worse moments, we end up standing next to Pontius Pilate with our arms crossed defiantly on our chests answering back, “What is truth?” But what snaps us out of our cynicism and doubt is when someone’s hands, whom we trust, reach out to caress our face and re-direct our gaze so we will look them straight in the eye: An elder who quietly says, “When an old person dies, it is as if a library has burnt down. Listen to me.” A mother who says, “I won’t be here always, so I’ve written down my history and your father’s history so that you will know it well.” A teacher of the faith who sincerely says, “There are many words that people will say to you. I offer you something in words that come from my heart. I believe that Jesus was born, lived and died, and that he was raised from the dead. In him is the fullness of God, the fullest expression of God’s love and spirit, and in *his* story is an assurance deeper than anything else I can offer you – the assurance that God heals and saves us, all of us, now and for all time. That is what I want you to know and, by grace, to believe.”

This is the third week of Advent. How do we prepare ourselves to welcome the birth of Christ, to keep fresh our expectations that Christ will come again as the fullness of God’s realm is revealed and the nations are healed? We prepare ourselves by picturing a blank piece of paper and the face of someone we love, to whom we want to tell the things that really matter. We want to tell them clearly, in an orderly account, and speak from our heart.

Think about what you would say, and to whom. I can imagine no better way to prepare for what is to come.

AMEN

¹ Book Review of V.S. Naipaul’s *The Masque of Death*, *New York Times Book Review*, Jan. 7, 2010.