

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
5327 W. Washington Blvd.
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

St. Luke, Evangelist
October 18, 2009
Luke 1:1-4; 24:44-48

"A Blessed Certainty"
by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

A few weeks ago, one of our Altar Guild members asked me a question about what we were going to do about the paraments on the altar and in the chancel on the last two weeks of October. She noted that it was possible to have two weeks in a row with red as the color. It was my first notification of that fact. Red is the color used for days of commemorations of saints and martyrs. It is also the color for a day like the Festival of the Reformation (a festival of the church) which we will celebrate next week. And indeed, this Sunday is one of those "red-letter" days in the church calendar. It is the day set aside to remember St. Luke the Evangelist. There could be no better text to be used than the opening and closing verses of the Gospel of Luke which is the Gospel lesson for this day. But as we study this text we will see that the emphasis of this day is not so much about the man Luke but about the message. It is a message that leaves us with in the words of our theme: "A Blessed Certainty" as it points to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and faith and in the holy Christian Church. We will look at the man, the message, and the certainty of the message. May the Lord's word enlighten us.

I. The Man

Since this is his day, it is interesting to note that Luke's name is mentioned only three times in the New Testament. Each of those times is by St. Paul. Luke's name never occurs in the writings attributed to him, the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. At the conclusion of the letter to Colossians, Paul refers to "our dear friend Luke, the doctor." Luke is also mentioned among Paul's fellow workers at the end of the epistle to Philemon. And most strikingly, Paul in the Epistle for today, in the Second Letter to Timothy, as he describes all the rest of his companions who have left him in his imprisonment simply and eloquently states, "Luke alone is with me." Luke remained with Paul until the end of his life. And that is all that Scripture says. From this we can probably infer a few things. Luke was a Gentile, as his name would suggest and also by the fact that in Colossians he is not listed among the Jewish fellow workers of the Apostle. We also know that he was a doctor who apparently continued in that profession even while accompanying St. Paul. And that is not much to go on is it? There are some historical references to Luke in the early Christian writings but outside of these few Scriptural references there is very little. But we know much more about St. Luke than just these few facts, for about 1/4 of the New Testament in total words are attributed from the earliest history of the Christian Church by unanimous witness to Luke—namely the Gospel bearing his name and the Acts of the Apostles. That is more words written than by any other individual in the New Testament, including St. Paul. His writings are a fitting testimony to the power of the Holy Spirit in the life of this man.

II. The Message

Both the Gospel of Luke and Acts begin with a most formal and personal address to a man whose name is Theophilus. We do not know any more about him. Some have even suggested that his name which means “friend of God” might indicate a more general audience for these books. But more importantly the opening words show that Luke was a careful writer. He states his purpose most carefully in the first verses of the Gospel, “Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.” As Luke says, he investigated carefully. He wrote down eyewitness accounts. He set forth an orderly account. And it is thanks to his careful research and the guidance of the Holy Spirit that we know the details of the birth of John the Baptist, of the census ordered by Caesar Augustus and of the journey of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It is from Luke that we know of the birth of Jesus in the stable and the visit of the Shepherds. From these accounts many have surmised going back to the early church that Luke may well have spoken with Mary, the mother of our Lord herself. For she plays an important role in all those events. In any event, it can be stated that St. Luke is the Christmas evangelist.

The liturgy of the church would be much poorer were it not for Luke’s record of the Benedictus, the song of Zecharias, “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed his people”; and the Magnificat, the song of Mary: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior”; and the Gloria in Excelsis, the song of the angels, “Glory to God in the highest”; and the Nunc Dimittis, the song of Simeon: “Lord, now let your servant go in peace according to your word.” These canticles have all been included this morning in our order of worship—we sing versions of them translated into hymn forms. Use your worship folder to look up these songs in the Gospel of Luke later. The references are given for you.

It is also from St. Luke alone that we know of some of the most familiar and precious accounts of the teachings and words of Jesus. The parables of the prodigal son and the good Samaritan, the story of Mary and Martha, the journey of the two disciples to Emmaus and their special house guest on the first Easter evening and the ascension of our Lord are just some of the examples. And of course, this does not include all of the events recorded in the book of Acts, the first Pentecost, the stoning of Stephen, the visit of Peter with Cornelius at Joppa, the conversion and missionary journeys of St. Paul, and the evidence of Luke’s own presence in those accounts in the sections where he uses the little word “we” to indicate that he is present at certain of those times in the book of Acts including the final chapters.

The careful writings of St. Luke have given to the Christian Church much of the historical details of its early history. Perhaps the doctor, Luke, trained to observe the symptoms and

conditions of his patients, was the perfect candidate to write such an orderly account of the Lord Jesus and His Church.

III. The Certainty

Finally, we must be more than grateful, for the work of St. Luke the Evangelist has a much different purpose than that of ordinary historians. He is called an evangelist—that is, an announcer of good news. That is why he wrote to Theophilus that he might be certain of the things that have taken place. For Luke is speaking of our salvation. He is presenting to us the life, works and words of not just any person, but of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. So it is that Luke's Gospel ends with the words of Jesus: "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures,⁴⁶ and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead,⁴⁷ And that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem."⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things." These words of our Lord are for us too. They show us the power of the word of God, of the Scriptures which are able to make us wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. And those words work on people who are spiritually dead and lost in sin. In the power of the word, the Holy Spirit works and makes each of us a "Theophilus" (a friend of God).

For everything that has been written has been written for our learning as St. John writes at the end of his Gospel, "These things were written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you might have life in his name." That is the certainty of which St. Luke speaks. It is the certainty of faith which St. Paul so powerfully confesses in the words of the epistle for today, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.⁸ Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing."

In the blessed certainty of that faith, we are also witnesses of these things. The message proclaimed by St. Luke, by the apostles and evangelists is far too important to be hidden under a bushel. It needs to be shared with neighbors who may not know or maybe even with members of our own families. For how can we keep such a precious and life-giving message to ourselves?

Conclusion

So then, we have not really spent as much time on the man Luke as on his message. For it is his message that is the most important and it is not his alone but the message of the Holy Spirit. It is the message where we find "A Blessed Certainty." As we sang before in the Hymn of the day:

For that beloved physician
All praise, whose Gospel shows
The Healer of the nations,
The one who shares our woes.
Your wine and oil, O Savior,
Upon our spirits pour
And with true balm of Gilead
anoint us evermore.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.