

Luke 1:1-4

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.

“The Gospel of Luke: Christ is Alive. He’ll Meet Us at the Table”

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It seemed like a good idea, I never had done this before, to preach a sermon series on the Gospels, and I decided to begin with the Gospel of Luke, thought that wasn't the first of the Gospels written, but it tells the story of ritual and sacrament, and some people call Luke the "gourmet Gospel," I mean, there's a certain kind of theme there that involves food, so I put on the bulletin the symbol from the Book of Kells, the four Gospels and the documents written in the year 800. The Book of Kells in Ireland, many of us have actually seen the Book of Kells. This is the symbol for the Gospel of Luke, what's on the front of your bulletin, and it's an ox, in case you can't tell. It's an ox because the first story in Luke's Gospel is Zachariah, father of John the Baptist, and how he sacrificed an ox at the temple in Jerusalem. The Book of Kells, an ox, sacrament, the Gospel of Luke.

And so in the spirit of the writer of the Gospel of Luke, "Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word," which is to say, "I wasn't an eyewitness, but I'm going to pass this down to you," I too decided to write an orderly account, so I thought I would write an orderly account for you beginning with who wrote Luke, and I read in the commentaries, I really haven't found anybody who disagrees with what I'm about to say, that the oldest traditions of the Christian church identify Luke as a doctor who traveled with Paul, but modern scholars doubt that, and I thought I could tell you where it was written but that is also uncertain. And I thought I could tell you when it was written, and I discovered Luke wrote this account after Mark. Mark composed the first Gospel, and Luke had Mark. Luke wrote this account, and the typical suggestion, scholars suggest, that Luke wrote the account around 85, which is 50-some years after the crucifixion, and then I found, although the Gospels could have been completed five to fifteen years earlier, or five to ten years later.

We don't know who wrote it, we don't know when it was written or where. It's like a friend said to me one time, I think generally a commentary on my ministry, "I fully realize that you have not succeeded in answering all of our questions, and indeed I feel you have not answered any of our questions completely, and the answers you have found for us only serve to raise a whole new set of questions which only lead to problems which we didn't know we had, and to sum it up, therefore, in some ways, I feel that you have confused us. But because of you perhaps maybe we are confused on a higher level or about more important things." So there's not much I'm sure of, or maybe I am confused

on a higher level. Luke is telling us, I think, two things unique to Luke, important to us, about what we get into and what gets into us.

First of all, it's about what we get into. No matter what we get into, there is something to learn, and Luke would want us to know God is present. Luke wrote to someone named Theophilus, but again, if you look at what is said about that from the scholars' point of view, it is suggested that Theophilus is not a person but it is a name used to suggest what the word Theophilus means. Luke wrote to Theos (God) Philos (Lover). Luke wrote to those who loved God. Whatever we get into, there is something for us to learn. On the road to Damascus, Paul saw the blinding light. That's in Acts, and the rest is history. On the road from Jerusalem, they realized their 12-year-old was missing, and they found him in the temple. On the road to Samaria, a man was beaten and left to die by the side of the road, and the good Samaritan came. On the road to Emmaus, which is what our story today talks about, the disciples met a stranger on the road to Emmaus, a difficult road. I don't know how many of you have actually been to Emmaus, but I know that ever one of us have been on the road to it, when you think about it. It was a rough road. It was a painful trip. It was a time the disciples were thinking about loss, and what was and what might have been, and about where they go from there, and what did we get ourselves into? We've all been on that road. Jesus' death on the cross is what sent them on that road, the road to Emmaus. It was long and hard, always is. What do we find on the road? Inspiration, we find God in the flux of common life, of problems. What we get into, it's inspiration. God-lovers know God is in it.

Arnold Palmer the golfer was interviewed by Charlie Rose this week, if you saw it. Oh my goodness, what an interesting interview. He said that his daddy told him about golf. He said, "The game of golf is, you hit the ball, you go get it and you hit it again." Palmer said, "The way I played the game is the way I lived my life. In golf it's about three things. There aren't opponents, there's nobody else there, it's about you, the club, and the ball." He said, "When you look up and you see this row of trees in front of you, and there's a little space between a couple of them, I always decide to hit the ball through the trees, while everyone else seemed to want to go around them. I lost some games I should have won. But I also won some games I should have lost." What do we get into? Whatever it is, it's fraught with potential inspiration. God-lovers get it. Bill Coffin, pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, was asked by the state department in 1979 to go to Iran and to bring Christmas to the hostages. What had he gotten himself into? That experience changed his life.

This is what he said. "They marched in four Marines. They were big. Their fatigues were clean. Their boots were shined. I gave them each a hug. We sat down on the couch. Mohammed, one of the Muslim guards, sat between two of them. Ali, the other guard, sat between the other two. I passed out Christmas carol books. We sang "Silent Night." I played it on the piano. I suggested we read the Christmas story, the second chapter of Luke. We took turns reading it. After we finished reading the story I said, "It was cold and dark and damp and lonely and Joseph must have been tired, and Mary exhausted, and there was no room for them in the inn, and no one would move over for a pregnant woman. So they ended up in a stable. He was the bread of life for human beings was born

in a feed box fit for animals. It was a terrible Christmas, but you see God's love can change "noplacel" into "someplace," just as God can change a nobody into a somebody." And then I said to them, "This is certainly not the most joyful Christmas in your life, but it could turn out, it may be, the most meaningful." Then we all took hands, Mohammed and Ali took and as we held hands I prayed, and I prayed that we might all experience a moment of grace, a moment when as always in the sight of God there would be neither captor nor captive, neither American nor Iranian, and I prayed that the Christ child might find hearts wide enough to lodge in, and I prayed that, rather than rallying around a flag, we would be able to gather around the holy Child as members of the same family. It was moving. All of us began to respond, to speak. Each of us spoke of God as we saw God. Mohammed was trying to fight back the tears, but he couldn't wipe away the tears because his hands were being held by a couple of large Marines. I too was prepared to weep. After all, that's why God gave us tears, to wipe away bitterness and anger."

On the road, in the darkest time, what we get ourselves into, there's God. Always, there is God. Inspiration in the least of times and the worst of times, in the most stressed of times, God-lovers, God is present in the worst of time, helping us find the best of time. What do we get ourselves into, bad things? Some really bad things. The ad in the newspaper said it all. "For sale, wedding dress, size 8, worn once by mistake." It's a marriage that doesn't work, or isn't working. What have I gotten myself into? It's a job that's going nowhere, and I'm asked to compromise my values. What have I gotten myself into? She sat by a window, looking out at nothing in particular, and she said, "I never wanted it to come to this, but here I am in a nursing home. It's not my home. But I will be happy here." And she will be. He got into his car, he thought about his future and what it meant to go to a place he'd never been, away from the people he knew, to people he had never met, and he said to himself, "College is not easy, but I will make it." And he will.

Ted Geisel was in the hospital. It was his road to Emmaus. His days were numbered, his options were diminishing, he wondered about his future. It's in his biography, written by Judith and Neil Morgan. Ted Geisel, Dr. Seuss, in the hospital, counting out his time. It was an inspiration. He got an idea. When he had nothing to look forward to, this is what he wrote. "You have brains in your head, you have feet in your shoes, you can steer yourself any direction you choose. You're on your own, you know what you know, and you are the one who decides where to go. O, the places you'll go." One of this favorite books, one of the most popular books, often given to graduates of high school and college, *O, the Places You'll Go*. On the road, in the hospital, where he didn't want to be, like the disciples after Jesus' death, like the hostages at Christmas, like Mary and Joseph in Bethlemlen. What we get into when we don't like where we are, when we don't like whom we are with, when we don't like what we do, when we don't like what has happened to us, when we don't know where we're going, when the hero lets us down, or when our Messiah is crucified. For God-lovers, the Holy Spirit comes in the hard times and helps us get through them. God-lovers, it makes us know that we are not alone when we're lonely. It lets us be aware that we are being cared for when we think nobody cares. Luke, the holy Spirit, inspiration. It's about what we get into. Luke wrote an orderly story to God-lovers about how God is with us no matter what we get into.

The second theme that I want to lift up, to think about, is what gets into us. Luke wants us to think about our influences, our passions. He wants us to reflect upon our faith and how it works. Wants us to realize the resurrected Christ is not an empty symbol, but rather a vital force. What gets into us? What gets into us? John Hortberg went with his wife to a yoga class for the first time in his life. He had never been to a yoga class. I'm guessing it was probably the last time. He felt that yoga would never catch on because there's no way to keep score and you don't know who's winning. "And mostly we just stretched. I'm no good at stretching. On a good day, I can touch my knees." But what made it worse is, the other people in the class were clearly double-jointed except for this one middle-aged woman who didn't look particularly fit. "I thought I would definitely be able to beat her at whatever you compete at in yoga. But it turns out she was a dancer, and at one point, she did the splits with her legs put back behind her head, and if they'd been keeping score I would have lost at that point on the mercy rule. Afterwards, I did ask the instructor if the woman could be tested for performance-enhancing drugs."

What gets into us? What makes us think life is about winning or losing? Luke invites us to imagine Christ gets into us, and it's not about what we believe, but what we take into ourselves. The stranger on the road to Emmaus. What gets into us? Walter Wangerin remembers as a child, "I don't know how old I was. I know that I was young enough to be able to crawl under the pews and old enough to be able to stand on the pews when people were singing, and be hidden. I was old enough to want to see Jesus, and young enough to believe that I could actually see him. I wanted to see Jesus. It was a crisis. I wanted to see him. I wanted to be an eye-witness. I wanted to see his robe. I wanted to see the rope on his waist. I wanted to see his strong hands, the sandals on his feet, the tumble of his wonderful hair, the love in his eyes, especially as he looked at me. I knew he was in the church that day, because they said he was. I kept a shrewd eye on the altar for the rest of the service, to be sure he didn't escape. But Jesus seemed nowhere in this church for me. I was a sorrowful disciple. Did I betray him? Why did he leave me? Why couldn't I see him? The preacher was dressed in black, lifting bread, mumbling, lifting this immense, enormous cup, mumbling some words I would likely never understand. This cup is the New Testament in my blood? Huh? Something like, "Do this in remembrance of me." People began to rise and come forward. My mother got up. I went with her down the aisle to the front of the church. She did a childish thing. She knelt down. So did I. She bowed her head. So did I. The preacher gave us bread, and then the preacher gave us this little cup, and we ate and we drank and then we came back to our seats and we sat down, and I smelled something different. I tasted the scent deep in my throat. And I found myself like a puppy sniffing closer and closer to my mother's face for the odor seemed to be rising from her nostrils. Suddenly she looked at me to see my face close to hers, and she said, "What's the matter?" "Mama," I breathed in wonder. "What is it?" She wrinkled her forehead. "What is it?" "The smell. What do I smell? Is it what you drank? Is it what I drank? What is it?" She began to look through the hymn book, looking for a hymn. "Oh, Walter, it's Jesus. Jesus inside us. Eucharist." Walter thought to himself, "Jesus, that's where Jesus was. Not hidden or hiding. Closer to me than I thought. I'd been looking the wrong way."

Luke wants us to see it too. What gets inside us? It was the stranger on the road. He talked about Scripture. He broke the bread. They took and ate. Eucharist. All of a sudden, it was clear to them. Luke wants us to know it too. Christ comes as a stranger on the road as each of us are to each of us, offering us in ways Jesus. We take the bread and the cup. What gets into us, and what happens when it does? We are not the same man. We are not the same woman. We are not the same child. It's like a stem-cell transplant, a deep DNA modification. It's a change of pace or heart or mind. When we get up from the table we are not the person we were when we knelt down. It's just bread, it's just grape juice, that's all it is. But we're not what we were.

I came to the table thinking I was nothing, and I left thinking Christ was in me, and I'm something else. I came to the table thinking I could do all things and I need no one else, and I left the table with my importance mixed in with my impotence, saying "I can do all things, but with others." I came to the table thinking it's over, and there's no hope. I left the table with a sense that that's just beginning, that the last chapter of the old book is the first chapter of a new book. I came to the table with a solo I thought no one wanted to hear. I left the table as a member of a chorus people would come for miles to enjoy. You cannot be a stranger at the table of the Lord, and you cannot leave the table the way you knelt down when you got there, because when you get back in your cars, your DUI - driving under the influence of one who said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for what is right. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the pure in spirit."

Luke - we don't know who wrote it. We really don't know to whom it was written, and we don't know where it was written. We may be confused about a lot of things, but we are confused on a higher level and about more important things because the essential truth of the Gospel is very certain. We are more confident. We can endure what we get ourselves into, and we are able to live more fully if we are careful what gets into us, because we are Theophilus. God-lovers, lovers of God and we understand.