

“Luke, the Holy Spirit, and the Great Leveling”

As we begin a new liturgical year this Advent, the lectionary focuses in on the gospel of Luke. In the three-year cycle, year A focuses on Matthew, year B on Mark, and year C on Luke, with readings from John thrown in across the three years. And so as we begin this new year it’s important that we set Luke in context.

We’ve spent the last three weeks in our Bible study looking at an overview of each of the 3 “synoptic” gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and this week we will be looking at John.

I don’t know if you’ve ever thought about why we have more than one gospel but I think a helpful way to look at it is to realize that no single book has a monopoly on truth.

No single author can claim to tell the story in its entirety.

The story of Jesus is just too big to be captured in a single narrative.

God is too great to be understood through only one lens.

It would be like only having one news channel available.

Whether it’s Fox News or MSNBC or CNN or any other news network,

each one is going to tell any given story in a way that plays to their differing audiences, and each is going to show it through its own particular lens.

Matthew, for example, was written primarily to a Jewish audience,

while Luke was written to the widest possible audience, including both Jews and Romans.

That may not mean a whole lot to us

because we live in an entirely different time and place and culture,

so let me try to explain what it might have been like to be a Jew in Jesus’ day.

The land that once had belonged to Israel and ruled by Israel

had been invaded, conquered, and was now occupied territory.

While the Jews may have been more numerous,

they were oppressed, marginalized, and victimized.

Even though some Jews high up in the religious establishment

enjoyed a certain amount of power and privilege,

it was always tenuous and often at the expense of their own people.

Jews were mostly poor and powerless, seen as backwards and unsophisticated and uneducated, and deserving of their lot in life.

They endured micro-aggressions at the hands of the occupying forces on a daily basis,

and they lived with the knowledge that they were not really seen as fully human

so if they weren’t careful to tow the line and stay under the radar,

they could be imprisoned, attacked, or killed at any moment.

Whether you want to compare it
to the indigenous people and the European colonizers here in this country,
or the Arians and Jews living in Nazi Germany,
or the blacks and the whites under South Africa apartheid,
or the Hazaras and the Taliban in Afghanistan,
or black and white people in our country today,
the Jews in Jesus' day were NOT the dominant culture.
They were the ones oppressed by the dominant culture of Rome.

And it was to that group that Matthew wrote his gospel,
a gospel whose main goal was to give oppressed people the help and the hope they needed
in order to cope with the injustice they endured in their daily lives.

But Luke, on the other hand, was addressed to everyone –
to the oppressed and the oppressors,
to the mighty and the lowly,
to the haves and the have-nots.

That's why after a short introduction,
Luke begins his gospel by talking about both the powerful King Herod
and the lowly Jewish priest Zachariah and his wife Elizabeth
who were so powerless they could not even manage to have a child of their own.

And then in today's reading we hear a whole list of the powerful —
Caesar Tiberius the emperor, Pontius Pilate the governor, Herod the King,
Philip and Lysanias 2 of the tetrarchs, and Annas and Caiaphas the high priests —
and then about the powerless one, John,
who hadn't even managed to live up to his parents' standards to become a temple priest,
but had descended into what those in power no doubt saw
as an even lower class of crazy religious nut.

So the first thing to note about Luke's gospel
is that he makes it clear that there are 2 classes of people —
the powerful and the powerless,
the haves and the have-nots,
those with the control and those under it.

And the second thing to note is that time and time again
Luke makes it clear that this division is not what God wants.

In today's gospel he gives us Zachariah's prophecy, that
"Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low,"
a symbol of the Great Leveling, the equality and equity God desires
for each and every one of his children.

Two weeks from now we'll hear the song of Mary that Luke shares,
which makes God's desire even more explicit:

*"He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty."*
Luke makes it clear that it is God's deep desire and purpose to level the playing field.

The third thing to note is that Luke makes it clear
that the Holy Spirit speaks and works not through those in power,
not through those who have control,
and not through those in the dominant culture,
but through people in the lower oppressed class,
those who are marginalized, and victimized,
those who are without power or wealth or fame.

And finally, despite the fact that over and over again he calls for a leveling out
between the powerful and the powerless,
those in control and those being controlled,
those who have and those who have not,
Luke also makes it clear that the reward of giving up
power and privilege, safety and security, comfort and convenience, is well worth it.

Next week we will look more at John the Baptist's call to repentance,
but for this week I just ask you to reflect on Luke and his gospel message
to a world that is still divided by a deep chasm
between those who enjoy power & privilege & safety & security & comfort & convenience
and those who don't,
a message that calls us to bridge that chasm,
not through our own power but through the power of the Spirit –
a Spirit that tends to speak through those who are not a part of our dominant culture.

Luke's gospel is the one that is probably the hardest for us to hear,
because it doesn't just offer help and hope
to those who are marginalized, victimized, and oppressed.
It calls on those who are part of the dominant class to change –
to see things from a different perspective,
to build relationships with those who are different from us,
and to work to level out the playing field
so that each and every one of God's children can have access to all that they need.
It calls on us to fulfill our baptismal commitment
to work for the justice and peace in all the world.
It calls on us to give up what we have for the sake of those who have less.

It's not easy. And it can be downright scary.

But when we are willing to give up our control and comfort and convenience,
when we're willing to go in search of those through whom the Spirit is speaking,
when we're willing to listen and obey,
we will find something far greater
than anything power or wealth or fame could ever give.
We will find ourselves in God's presence
where there is fullness of joy, peace that passes understanding,
and life more abundant than anything we have yet dreamed.

Of that I am sure. Thanks be to God! Amen