

Little Outposts of the Kingdom

This morning, we commemorate the feast of our patron, St. Luke the Evangelist. There's a lot to celebrate about this most prolific author of the New Testament. Luke's Gospel blesses us with Jesus's most beloved parables and the beautiful birth narrative that we lovingly retell every Christmas. Luke has also given us the extraordinary history of Christianity's beginnings in his Book of Acts. We can only be grateful for these two priceless gifts.

But as the world watches Israel and Hamas at war, an unqualified celebration would be insensitive at best. Thousands have already died in the conflict; millions more are at risk. As Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby put it, "Our hearts are broken open by the grief of Israelis and our Jewish brothers and sisters around the world, for whom this trauma and loss stands in the dark and terrible shadow of the worst days of their history." Our own Bishops Sutton and Schofield-Broadbent expressed our horror and sorrow when they wrote, "[o]ur hearts are heavy with lamentation over what is happening in the Holy Land – a land that the three Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam hold so dear." They have asked us to pray for peace in Jerusalem and the Holy Land and for the safety of the innocents. We'll do that for sure. But this remains the Sunday set aside for our congregation to honor our patron saint, and we're going to do that, too.

In preparing this sermon, I found myself thinking less about what St. Luke has written than about who he was. Bible scholar Frederick W. Schmidt observes that there are roughly two lines of thought among historians about whom Luke might have been. One group believes that Luke was a well-educated writer with an enviable command of Biblical Greek who is otherwise unknowable. Tradition paints a more detailed and colorful portrait of our patron. The early church believed that Luke was a physician and companion to the Apostle Paul. Luke was thought

to have written the Book of Acts as an older man, remembering their youthful travels. Paul's second letter to Timothy suggests that Luke was with Paul in the final days of his life. Known facts about Luke are scarce, but Schmidt thinks there are some things we can safely surmise about him. Luke was probably a Gentile with an excellent Greek education. He knew so much about Judaism as influenced by Jesus's ministry that he had to be a believer. He was broadly familiar with the challenges facing the early church and committed to making Christianity accessible to the church's burgeoning Gentile constituency. As Schmidt puts it, "[i]f the writer was not the Luke whom Paul knew, the author was undoubtedly someone like him."

Tradition also tells us that Luke's Gospel reflects a particular theological slant. Applying what they called "the divine logic of four Gospels," the early church fathers linked the Evangelists with the four angels that guard God's throne in the Books of Ezekiel and Revelation. (As Bible scholar Joel B. Green points out, this tradition supports the early church's decision to limit the authorized gospels to four.) Our own tapestries, based on the Irish Book of Kells, reflect that tradition. The four angels with the faces of a lion, an eagle, a man, and a calf, represent the Gospels of Mark, John, Matthew, and Luke respectively. Luke's Gospel, represented by the calf, emphasizes Jesus's role as the Divine Sacrifice. This association has become somewhat less theologically important over the centuries, but it has special relevance this morning.

As Paul's traveling companion, Luke would have seen the sacrifices that the apostles made to bring the good news of Christianity to the world. He would have observed the threats they faced from the Temple authorities and from Rome. He would have seen the physical toll that extensive travel and persecution inflicted on the apostles, especially his patient Paul. And Luke would have witnessed the devotion that Jesus's willing self-sacrifice inspired in his followers, and their disappointment when the promised Kingdom lagged in coming. By writing his "orderly

account” of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection, and assuring us that Jesus will come back to us, but only in “the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority,” Luke fosters hope. At the same time, Luke gently reminds us that we might have to wait a while, making sacrifices of our own, until Jesus’s triumphant return.

That raised another question for me. What, exactly, are churches for? In today’s reading from Luke’s Gospel, Jesus announces his ministry with a reading from Isaiah. It’s an inspiring performance, but it doesn’t capture the whole of Jesus’s mission. Jesus promises to preach and proclaim, both worthy prophetic purposes. But we know that Jesus, while the greatest of all prophets, wasn’t *exclusively* a prophet. He prophesied, but he also taught, healed, prayed, worshiped, and allowed himself to be crucified so that his death and resurrection could redeem us all. As his church – and by “his church” I mean this congregation along with our fellow believers – I think we’re called to do something along the same lines.

Evangelism, the modern Christian’s version of prophecy, is a big part of the church’s mission. Episcopalians are notoriously shy about that, and I sometimes wish we were less reluctant to share our beliefs. You don’t have to be a pulpit-pounding publicity hound to tell people how your faith enriches your life and to invite them to visit us some Sunday. But we don’t have to talk about our faith if our actions speak for us. If people know we’re Christians and see us living happily into Jesus’s teachings, they’re going to figure out that we’re onto something good. If we seem happy enough, they might even want to give it a shot themselves.

But, like Jesus himself, we have to *do*, not just talk. Churches do a lot of things, and most of them don’t have to be done on holy ground. We can feed the hungry and tend the sick wherever we find space to do it. We can worship and praise God almost anyplace – just ask the folks who run camps and tent revivals. We can gather for Bible study and hospitality anywhere

from our dining rooms to our local Starbucks. Even the Eucharist can be shared in homes and hospitals as the need arises. Our stately cathedrals and sanctuaries deserve love and care, but they're not the church. *We* are the church, and our purpose exists wherever we go.

At their best, our churches are little outposts of the Kingdom of Heaven, offering hope to a world in pain and need. We at St. Luke's are blessed to have this beautiful building on our gorgeous grounds as our outpost from which to carry out our sacred mission. We're a Goldilocks church, small enough to be warmly welcoming, big enough to accomplish remarkable things. Here, we can pray, sing, praise, and worship our God. We can serve our neighbors with our food pantry and our Restoration of Nature project. We can open our doors and our hearts to community organizations like the Freedom Singers, the Cub Scouts and Alcoholics Anonymous. And we can share our exceptional music with our friends across Annapolis. Some churches are almost museums, proudly displaying their expensive treasures. There's nothing wrong with offering beauty to God, and a great many masterpieces have been created over the centuries to decorate houses of worship. But this is a working church created for working people, home to a welcoming congregation with an enormous heart. I like to think our patron would approve.

In a few minutes, we'll head downstairs to celebrate St. Luke's feast with ice cream and other sweet delights. We'll rejoice, honoring the Bible's master storyteller and historian. As we do, we'll do well to remember that Luke described not only Jesus's victories, but also his frustrations, sufferings, and sacrifice. He witnessed both the successes and the struggles of the early Christian church. I believe Luke would want us to celebrate his gifts to our faith *and* prayerfully remember our fellow children of Abraham in Israel and Gaza, who probably aren't eating much ice cream right now. We can rise to that challenge because we are the church of Jesus and St. Luke. By their grace, we can and will do both. Amen.