

## Doctor, Writer, Artist, Saint – Celebrating Luke the Evangelist

This morning, we celebrate Luke the Evangelist, patron saint of artists, physicians, bachelors, surgeons, students, and, of course, this congregation. According to Christian tradition, Luke wrote both the Gospel that bears his name and the Book of Acts. If tradition has it right, that would make Luke the author of about a quarter of the New Testament, an extraordinary accomplishment.

I say “if” because we know almost nothing about Luke by modern historical standards. Paul mentions Luke in his letters, calling Luke his “companion” and “beloved physician.” Luke tells us that he didn’t personally witness Jesus’s life and ministry, something he has in common with Paul. Some Bible scholars agree with the tradition that Luke was a Gentile who lived in Antioch and wrote for a largely Gentile or mixed audience. If so, he would have been the only Gospel author who wasn’t Jewish. However, his intimate knowledge of the Old Testament and the care he took to tie Jesus’s life to Hebrew Messianic prophecies suggests to other scholars that Luke was a Jewish Christian who followed a Greek lifestyle. Whatever his background, scholars agree that Luke is the most literary of the New Testament writers. His elegant Greek and sophisticated use of the historiographic conventions of his day suggest that Luke was well-off and well-educated, so he may indeed have been a doctor as well as an accomplished author and Christian teacher. Tradition also tells us that Luke was the first icon painter, and the first to paint a portrait of the Holy Mother. No historical proof of that exists, but it’s a charming notion that may have its roots in the meticulous images that fill Luke’s stories. Jesus’s birth narrative, replete with shepherds in the fields and singing angels in the skies, the flaming tongues of fire hovering over the apostles at Pentecost, and many of Jesus’s best parables would be lost to us without the evocative writings of Paul’s beloved doctor and friend.

In today's Gospel passage, Luke presents Jesus early in his ministry, brimming with the power of the Holy Spirit as he proclaims to his friends and neighbors that the prophecies of Isaiah had been fulfilled in their hearing. Jesus quotes Isaiah to explain that "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Isaiah's prophecies offer hope and healing to the poor, the captive, the disabled, and the oppressed. They are a divine promise, an assurance that, through Jesus, God will take care of his suffering people. And isn't taking care of people exactly what doctors are supposed to do?

Well, maybe. If you're like me, you may not especially enjoy trips to the doctor. This is no criticism of my own internist, a lovely, compassionate person who provides me with excellent care. It *is* a criticism of a health care system that too often puts efficiency and economy ahead of the patient's emotional and spiritual well-being. Waiting interminably to be weighed and measured, briefly examined, then lectured about taking better care of oneself by a harried physician who has no more than fifteen minutes to spare may be good business, but it's not good care. For a better example, we might look to St. Luke, the doctor who is said to have looked after Paul. Although Bible scholars question whether Paul himself wrote 2 Timothy, its reference to Luke is important. Writing from prison at the end of his life, Paul identifies several evangelists who have abandoned him, saying "only Luke is with me." As Paul's friend and physician, Luke stayed with him and took care of him. He didn't snap off a diagnosis and throw a prescription at Paul before bolting down the hall to the next patient. Although others left, Luke remained, keeping him company and tending to Paul's body and spirit day after day until the Roman authorities finally martyred him.

We can't all have a personal physician like St. Luke tending to us, but we can learn from his example what it means to take care of something or someone. Jesus promised to care for his flock throughout the four Gospels. During his ministry he healed – and sometimes resurrected – countless suffering people. In his Passion and Resurrection, Jesus healed all of humanity, freeing us from death and reconciling us to God. But Jesus's ministry required him to be a wanderer, to move from town to town preaching, teaching and healing the people, some of whom would never have been able to come to him. If he had lingered in Galilee or anywhere else, many of his miracles might never have taken place.

We know Jesus to be faithful in caring about every last one of the beloved children of God. Faith tells me that Jesus was with Paul in spirit from the moment they met on the road to Damascus. He hovered close to Paul throughout his ministry, strengthening and encouraging Paul through his travels and travails, soothing Paul's soul during his imprisonment and execution. But Jesus never walked into Paul's prison cell with food, water and medicine. Jesus never bathed Paul, bandaged his injuries, or nursed him through his illnesses. Jesus didn't have to – Luke was there for that. When it comes to the day-to-day tasks of care for one another and the world we share, I believe that Jesus looks to us, as he did to Luke, to take on the messy, vital work of the physical world and get it done.

There's a word for the careful and responsible tending to something or someone in one's care. That word is stewardship. It's a word that churches typically use to describe their annual efforts to raise enough money to keep the lights and the plumbing in working order. It's a fair description. Churches are physical buildings sitting on land. They require various kinds of upkeep, and that costs money. But stewardship is more than just writing a check, important as that is. When we're talking about a church, its congregation and its

surrounding community, stewardship is about taking care of what has been entrusted to us, extending our hands and offering our hearts to the people and places where the Holy Spirit sends us to serve.

Our congregation's Stewardship Season begins today and will run through our Commitment Sunday, November 6<sup>th</sup>, when we'll also celebrate the Feast of All Saints. During this time, we'll ask you to prayerfully consider what you can pledge financially to support St. Luke's operations in the coming year. But as you do, please think of stewardship not just in financial terms, but in terms of helping to take care of this beautiful church and the even more beautiful people who gather here, week after week, to worship Christ and share each other's joys and sorrows within a community of love. Think about how you can take care of St. Luke's and, just as important, how St. Luke's can take care of you. One of the axioms of this pandemic age is that no one can pour from an empty cup. If you are tired, troubled or in need of support, this is the place to come and be cared for.

No single church can save the world, but St. Luke's certainly does its part. Our food pantry, labyrinth, amphitheater, and Restoration of Nature are all beautiful gifts to our community, created and supported by this small but mighty congregation. Like our patron, St. Luke, this congregation has stayed through decades of change and challenge, taking good care of our neighbors and one another. It hasn't always been easy, and there will undoubtedly be trials ahead from time to time because that's how life goes. Like Paul, we can count on Jesus to be with us, bringing spiritual strength and solace as we move into whatever the future holds. And we can also count on each other, as Paul counted on our patron, St. Luke, to take gentle care of our church and one another. *Amen.*