

01-20-19

Luke's Epiphany

Luke 1:1-4

Pastor Wayne Puls, Senior Pastor at Hope Lutheran Church

Displayed in a little church in Moscow is one of the world's most ancient and most revered icons. Known as the Vladimir Icon, this picture of the infant Jesus and his mother, Mary, has a fascinating backstory. Ancient legends tell us that this icon was originally painted by none other than St. Luke, the writer of the New Testament's third Gospel. Luke traveled with St. Paul on some of his missionary journeys. He was a doctor, the Bible tells us; and historical legends say that he was an artist, as well.

So, for centuries, Christian artists have commonly depicted St. Luke painting just such a picture. Our bulletin cover this week has a modern version of such a scene.

Is this icon really Luke's work? Honestly, we don't know. But Luke's real portrait of Jesus is in his Gospel. Luke the evangelist paints a vivid, striking word picture of Jesus that has helped millions and billions of Christians, through the centuries, understand who Jesus really is.

You see, Dr. Luke came to realize that Jesus of Nazareth wasn't just some human teacher, healer, and miracle-worker. Luke had a real epiphany about Jesus. "This Jesus actually is my God, my Savior!" Luke recognized, when he came to faith.

And Luke wanted to help other people come to their own epiphany about Jesus. So, around 65 AD, he sat down and wrote an orderly, well-researched account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Today we read the first four verses of Luke's Gospel. This prologue lays out Luke's purpose and process, in creating

this portrayal of who Jesus is. Luke's writing this all out for a man named Theophilus, a Christian believer from a non-Jewish background. Luke seems to want to reassure Theophilus that his faith in Jesus, that his radical new religion, is valid, trustworthy, and true.

Luke, in his Gospel, explains the roots of this new Christian movement. He details the story of its founder, Jesus. And, most important, Luke lays out for Theophilus how God is truly at work in Christ. Luke wants to reassure Theophilus that his new religion is for real, that Jesus Christ is most assuredly his divine Savior and Lord.

Here we are, reading Luke's words, some 1950 years later. Our religion has a long history now, and we're part of a rich heritage. We're not just part of a 22-year-old congregation here in Wake Forest. We're part of a world-wide movement that's over 2000 years old.

And, yet, some of the questions St. Luke was addressing with his friend Theophilus are pertinent questions for church-goers still today.

- Are Christianity's claims about Jesus sustainable?
- Can we definitively say that Jesus Christ is the one and only way to salvation?
- In our world of instant communication and increasing religious plurality, how do we best share with others who Jesus is?
- How do we know Jesus really, truly, is God?

Luke's Gospel helps us find our answers. Luke's Gospel paints the picture. In story after story, we see God at work in the man Jesus of Nazareth. In chapter after chapter, Luke portrays Jesus as the true Son of God. In his teaching, in his healing, in his outreach to those on the fringes of society,

Luke shows Jesus carrying out God's plan to bring forgiveness and salvation to a world of sinners. Luke paints a beautiful portrait of God's power, God's love, God's caring, and God's salvation, all present and active in Jesus Christ.

For the next several weeks, we're going to dig deeper into Luke's epiphany. Let's look together at what Luke so carefully passed along to Theophilus. I challenge you to let Luke's words soak in, over the weeks ahead, and reinforce your understanding of who Jesus really is to you, and to our contemporaries in the world today. After all, these powerful stories, along with the other Bible narratives and teachings, form the basis of our faith. Inspired and prompted by God's Holy Spirit, what Luke and the other Bible writers wrote here is the bedrock of our faith, and the core of our understanding of who Jesus is. Luke's epiphany is for us, and for our world today.

Maybe, for some of us here in this room, there are significant, nagging questions about Jesus still in our minds. Maybe you're relatively new to this Christian faith, or not very well grounded yet in your beliefs. Many people entering the church are walking in to a new world. Maybe the church society, with its own theological language, its initially strange customs, and its traditions of worship and interaction seem a bit foreign and awkward to you. Why do people in this church shake hands at the beginning of the service, and again just before communion? Why do they celebrate communion every week? Why do some of these people sit in the same exact seats every single week? These are excellent questions. Sometimes just joining a church involves a cultural shift, just like back in Theophilus' day.

Then maybe, like Theophilus, you need some reassurance. Luke reminds us all today that Christianity is not just some man-made religion. It's not just one of the many pathways to

God, or just one more cultural expression of religion. Luke argues – and I echo his argument today – that Christianity is unique. In the person of Jesus Christ, God worked in mighty and powerful ways.

And, in Christ, God still works, for those who trust him. In Christ, God wants to work in your mind, in your heart, in your family, in your everyday life, to bring you into a powerful, life-changing relationship with him. In Christ, God invites you to live out this relationship with him in this new community, the church.

Let Luke's epiphany – his well-researched, historical, fact-based portrait of Christ – address some of the questions you may have about Jesus. Get to know your Lord better. Come to trust him more. Let our friend Luke be your guide, your portrait artist, for the next several weeks.

And together we'll see how God, in Christ, was reaching out with both power and humility to people like us, lifting us up and bringing us into his presence. We'll see God, in Jesus Christ, taking people who are "outside" his care, and making them "insiders," people involved and related to the God of the universe.

It's a truly beautiful portrait that St. Luke paints. It's the story of your God, your Savior, and you. Amen.