

Joy for the Friends of God

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December 16th, 2007

THE PROCLAIMED WORD

My cat has been under the weather with bladder stones. She's not been happy. She has to eat special food, and we can't leave the regular food out because she would eat it and that would be bad right now. She is not amused. She is certain that we are conspiring to starve her to death...though she is fed faithfully twice each day, the mere fact that there isn't food available 24/7 torments her and she voices her displeasure as soon as we come home each day. We open the door, and there she is making this pitiful noise ("mah"). It's like living with a tiny, furry Edward G. Robinson..."Mah...I'm unhappy, see." I always do a double take to see if she has a cigar in her mouth. She is not at this present time the incarnation of joy. But more about joy in a bit. Let's look at the gospel reading today.

The Gospel of Luke begins with these words:

"Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the events that have been fulfilled among us...I too have decided, after investigating everything accurately anew, to write it down in an orderly sequence for you, most excellent Theophilus..."

Luke is writing two or more generations AFTER the time of Jesus. But he claims to have investigated the material thoroughly to present a fresh narrative for his intended reader, Theophilus. Now, Theophilus means "friend of God," so the text may be for a community rather than for an individual. Theophilus may represent all who are friends of God.

It is immediately after the prologue, where Luke admits to researching oral traditions and constructing his own narrative, that he launches into the story of the announcement of John the Baptizer's birth.

Now, Luke has an agenda. He doesn't just want to retell Mark's story. He doesn't just want to retell Matthew's story. He doesn't just want to reorganize the oral traditions or just share whatever mystical experiences he may have had. Luke wants to tell the Jesus story from birth to execution and beyond, and suggest that this story has divine significance for his community, and that it even, somehow, is the fulfillment of scriptural promises.

Luke believes that Jesus' life can be understood as a continuation of the biblical witness, and the bible that Luke knows is what we call the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament. Luke interprets the scriptures he has inherited as a divine promise to people in need of hope and restoration, and he interprets Jesus' life as being somehow the fulfillment of that promise. Luke's agenda is to make that very case.

If you have heard me speak two or more times, you know that at least 3 of our 4 gospels, and possibly all four gospels, are written after Rome has destroyed the city of Jerusalem and its holy Temple. This event devastated the Jewish communities of the ancient world, and the movements that would eventually be known as Christian were at first part of Judaism. The people writing our gospels are personally grieved by the loss of the Temple. And so, in Luke's gospel, we hear a lot about including people who have been left out. We hear a lot about empowering the powerless. We hear a lot about giving hope to the hopeless. This is the message the people needed as their world was crashing down around them when brutal Empire attempted to rob them of their hope and their humanity.

And so Luke says, "you know what...times are hard, but our scriptures promise us something, and I believe those promises have been fulfilled in the life of Jesus." And he tells his version of the story of that life in such a way as to give hope to hurting people.

In this context, Luke puts pen to paper and gives us this liberating message. It begins by saying he's thought hard about the matter and researched it carefully, and then it goes into the story of John. He says that Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth are from good, religious, faithful, priestly families. Elizabeth is a descendant of Aaron, Moses' brother. They are good people, but they are childless. In some circles, it would have been assumed that a childless couple had somehow displeased God, but Luke makes the case right up front that these are good people. The judgments of others, even the judgments of other religious people, are not necessarily the judgments of God. Sometimes, good people suffer. Sometimes, the righteous know disappointment. Sometimes, it just isn't your fault. Our Temple and our holy city are gone, but not because God has judged us; in fact, we don't deserve such heartache, and not only has God not caused it, but God is somehow with us to comfort us in the midst of it. This is what Luke seems to be saying as he shows us the aging, childless, and GOOD couple – Elizabeth and Zechariah.

One day, while Zechariah is performing ministry...while this good person, this faithful person, is actually worshipping and serving his congregation, a messenger of God's love brings him this news: DO NOT BE AFRAID.

How many times does Luke give us that message? Do not be afraid. Yes, difficulties are upon us. Yes, times are hard. Yes, injustice exists. Yes, at times, the fit hits the shan. Yes the pain is real and the problems may threaten to overwhelm, but be encouraged. Don't give up hope. Don't give up, period. Face what is, and insist that things get better. Do not be afraid.

Of course, after being told to battle his own fears, Zechariah is then told that his prayers have made a difference. It took forever for them to be answered, but God's delays are not God's denials, and Zechariah remained faithful even when his best efforts and strongest faith brought no discernable results. And his patience and his indomitable, outrageous hope finally pays off. He will have a child after all and this child will bring him joy and gladness. Why? Not just because it's nice to have family, but because this child will be spirit-filled from conception. He will be a voice of encouragement for his people. He will operate in the spirit and power of Elijah.

Now remember, the prophet Malachi, speaking for God, said, "Lo, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the day of the Lord comes..." Elijah, according to sacred tradition, ascended into heaven while his disciple Elisha watched on and received a double portion of his spirit.

Malachi says that Elijah will one day return. Luke is saying that the day has come...Zechariah and Elizabeth will have a son and he will be the new Elijah. He will operate in the courageous, prophetic spirit of Elijah, and his presence indicates the presence of another.

By interpreting John's life to be the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy, Luke is making the claim that the day of the Lord has come with the arrival of Jesus! And if Jesus is Lord, then we can confront the injustices of "Lord Caesar" (or anything else that lords power or privilege or pain over us), because God is with us to empower and comfort and strengthen us along the way.

Luke makes the case for the Lordship of Jesus, over against the Lordship of the emperor, by telling stories of Jesus' unusual birth (the spirit is anointing Jesus as the messiah in utero as Luke tells the story). Luke tells of Jesus' powerful ministry, of the inability of death to defeat him, and in Luke's version, it is Jesus who ascends to the heavens, later to send his spirit upon his disciples at Pentecost.

Luke is telling his wounded community to not give up, the day of the Lord promised is their day and he weaves a tale to make that case. And it begins by equating John with Elijah, and saying that is the first sign that the day of the Lord has already come to pass.

Jesus may have been arrested and executed 50 or more years before Luke is writing. Jerusalem and its Temple may have been destroyed at least a decade and a half before Luke is writing. Persecution of Jews and followers of the Jesus Way may be on the rise at the time of Luke's

writing. But Luke dares to use the power of faith and imagination to say that the spirit of Jesus lives on not only in their memory, their stories, their ritual, but also in their consciousness, their souls, their very being. Luke isn't waiting for the day of the Lord, he is proclaiming it! He is declaring that this day is the long awaited and hoped for day. Luke, in spite of all that has happened in his world, is insisting on joy.

Luke starts it all off by saying Malachi's prophecy has been fulfilled in John, who then is the sign that the Lord has come. And he masterfully adds that the coming of this sign, the coming of John, brings Zechariah and Elizabeth joy and gladness. The message to Theophilus, to the friends of God, is "there is still reason to hope!" And this message is meant to give Theophilus, the friends of God, us, the gift of joy.

If we can have hope, we will find peace; and if we can find peace, we will experience joy. And if we can have joy...joy that isn't dependent on circumstances, we are blessed indeed.

In the story, Zechariah and Elizabeth receive the gift of joy, but the story is meant to give hope and joy to those who hear it...to all who are friends of God; to you and me. This is the Good News. Amen.

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THE AFFIRMING WORD

I embrace the power of hope!
I accept the promise of peace.
I embody and express joy.
Joy is God's gift to me.
Nothing can keep my joy from me.
My Good is at hand.
And so it is!

THE FINAL WORD

"Sometimes your joy is the source of your smile; but sometimes, your smile can be the source of your joy!" Thich Nhat Hanh