

September 12, 2010

A Heart for God: Luke's Special Witness
Sermon 1 - New Name, New Home

a sermon on Luke 1.1-4 & Acts 19.23-31
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This morning I am beginning a sermon series called "A Heart for God." It's about the special witness of Luke. Luke is our lectionary gospel this year, and I have preached from Luke throughout the year. Most of you are familiar with Luke's gospel and its sequel, the book of Acts. But there's more if you look deeper. Each gospel writer had his own personality, his own concerns, and his own purposes. In other words, each had his own special witness. Luke brings his own perspective to the story of Jesus. I want to help you recognize it and to hear what Luke has to say. In the end, of course, these are God's words. It is God's voice we must hear, not Luke's. Yet in his wisdom, God gave us the gospel through four human beings: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. When we pay attention to Luke's gospel, we hear God's word for us today.

This series will have four sermons. The one today, then a sermon on women, money, and ... prayer. If you thought I was going to say "fast cars," try to get with the program. Obviously the other gospels and the rest of the Bible have something to say about women, money, and prayer. But these themes were especially important to Luke. So was today's topic. Today's sermon is about Luke's agenda when he wrote his gospel and the book of Acts. Obviously, he wanted people to know about Jesus, but his agenda goes deeper. He was worried about the place of Christians in their communities. How did others see them? How did they see themselves? How did they fit in? And what happened if they didn't fit in?

Luke's friends had been given a new name: Christian. And a new home: the church. That's our name and our home too. Their troubles are also our troubles, as we will see.

Luke dedicates both his gospel and Acts to Theophilus. This may have been a real person. On the other hand, it means "One who loves God," so it may be a dedication to anyone who loves God. Here at the beginning, Luke explains his methods. He was careful to investigate the events he reports and to consult with eyewitnesses who were there and who know what they're talking about. Luke wants to assure Theophilus of the truth of these events.

Luke is going to take special care throughout his gospel to present Jesus as the fulfillment of God's purposes for Israel. Christianity was not something new in the first

century, even though people were hearing about Jesus of Nazareth for the first time. No, Christianity is the fulfillment of God's ancient and eternal purposes. Everything that came before Jesus led up to him, and everything now flows from him. God is doing something new and exciting, but it is exactly what he promised to do way back in the Law and the Prophets.

This was important to Luke, because he was writing for two kinds of people. One was educated pagans who might be quick to write off Christianity as some kooky new cult. Judaism they had heard of and maybe had a measure of respect for. Jesus of Nazareth, executed on a cross, resurrection from the dead? That was new. They had probably heard rumors about the Christians. Many people considered Christians dangerous, because they didn't worship the pagan gods or the Emperor. Their refusal was so unpatriotic that people thought they were up to no good. "Christians upset the public order," their critics charged. "They threaten our values and our way of life," their pagan despisers complained. Many people thought, "Christians are a menace." That's why Christians were persecuted. Luke wanted to convince his pagan readers. If they didn't believe him that Jesus is Lord, then at least they could see that Christians are not bad people.

His other readers were Christians, who needed reassurance because they had a foot in two worlds. They had one foot in the church, and one foot in the Roman Empire. They believed in Jesus, but it was not always easy. They faced an unbelieving culture that seemed so powerful, so believable. Emperor worship made sense in the first century. After all, the Emperor controlled everything. Or so it seemed. They faced prejudice and often persecution. It is one thing to believe in Jesus when everybody else does. It is easy to go to church when people will respect you for it. It is a very different thing to be a Christian when it costs you something, and to go to church when people will look down on you or make fun of you for it. I think this is so relevant for Christians in America today, because more and more we have a foot in two worlds. More about that in a moment.

I chose the account from Acts because it illustrates perfectly the problem Luke had in mind when he sat down to write. Luke's world was religiously diverse. They had all kinds of religions. Everybody got along because most people considered religion a private matter. You had the public religion, the gods of the state and the Emperor. Everybody worshipped those. Why not? The state was ultimate. The emperor was ultimate. Otherwise religion was a matter of personal taste. Sound familiar? "Live and let live" was the motto of the day. The other motto was, "Don't make waves."

Christians, whatever they went, without even trying to, made waves. On this occasion, the local silversmith's union got upset because Christian preaching had begun to hurt business. Ephesus was home to the temple of Artemis, which had been one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It burned and had to be rebuilt, but it was splendid and

dominated the city, both physically and economically. It was not only a place of worship; it was also part of the Roman banking system, kind of a federal reserve bank. It brought in plenty of tourism dollars. The silversmiths got their share by making little silver statues of Artemis and the temple.

Luke shows Christians are not dangerous by pointing out that the whole riot started because the instigators were worried about money. They were protecting their source of income. That's what they really cared about. He goes on, after our reading, to tell how the riot ended, and it's very anticlimactic. The town clerk tells the crowd that they don't have a good reason to riot, and their actions are illegal. The crowd dissolves and goes home. Luke makes fun of them by saying most of them had no idea what they were rioting about.

Luke says the Christians were not at fault, but that doesn't mean they weren't in danger. Paul's friends, some of them important officials, wouldn't let him go near the amphitheater. Paul had a one-track mind. He wanted to go preach to the crowd. His friends feared for his life, and rightly so. Also, you can bet the silversmiths had a lot of popular sympathy. They weren't the only ones who made a living off the temple of Artemis.

Now think about this, and try to put yourself in the place of those Christians back then. Can you imagine how you would feel if there were a riot in Mobile against Christianity that filled Ladd Peebles stadium? Imagine living in that kind of hostile environment. You would need reassurance too. You might feel lost, out of place, as if you didn't fit in. That's exactly how Luke's friends felt.

They had once been at home in pagan Roman culture. Now Jesus had changed them, and they didn't fit in anymore. They had to feel dislocated, like immigrants in their own hometown. That is why Luke wanted them to know, God had given them a new name, Christian, and a new home, the church. The church was not some kooky new superstition. It wasn't a mishmash of misfits and losers. Instead, the church is God's people. The church is God's instrument, and God uses it to change lives and communities.

Becoming a Christian might make you a stranger in your own culture, even in your own family; but you must hold fast to your faith in Jesus, and you can because God has given you a new home, the church, and a new name, Christian.

Luke's concern for Christians in his day is directly relevant to us. He wanted to assure them of the truth of the Christian gospel. This is God's Word to us today. Our situation is a lot like theirs. One foot in two worlds. We have one foot in the church, and one foot in a culture of unbelief. We got here a different way. Luke's Christian friends had been pagans at home in a pagan culture. Then God called them out of it. God said,

“You’re my people now, and my people have to be different.” We were Christians living happily in a Christian culture – at least the older ones among us were. Then our culture changed. Now, more and more, we stand out. And God is calling us to be different, to be his people. And that’s not always easy.

I know I have preached on this before, but I am not sure you realize how different we are and how difficult being a Christian is becoming. Two things lull us into a false sense of security. One is living in Mobile, Alabama. Culture changes more slowly in the South than in some other places. Christians here still enjoy some of the advantages of the old Christian culture. Think of it as cultural insulation that still protects us to some degree. We know the nation is changing, but mostly it is “out there” somewhere. In truth, it is closer than we realize, and much has changed and is changing.

Another thing that makes us feel safe is the fact that nearly 90% of Americans believe in God. That number hasn’t changed in decades. We are a religious people. But, our culture is very secular. Our institutions are secular: our schools, universities, government, the media, entertainment. The business world is secular. Every part of our public lives is secular. You may wonder how a democracy in which 90% of the people believe in God can become so secular, but keep in mind culture is made from the top down, not the bottom up.

A secular culture can have a corrosive effect on faith, especially the faith of young people. They live in a world that offers them identity and values without reference to God. They are constantly offered a different name and a different home. And though our secular culture cannot give them something to live for that ultimately satisfies, it can take a long time to figure this out. In the meantime, the world’s values and way can seem attractive, especially because everyone wants to fit it.

If a culture indifferent to Christianity were the only problem, we could cope. Unfortunately, our culture is also becoming more hostile toward Christianity. And for the same reasons today as in Luke’s day: Christianity asks you to believe things that are hard to believe; it claims to be right and to have real Truth; it makes exclusive claims about Jesus – that he is the only way – and it is a threat to the values of the larger culture.

I want to share with you a letter a college student wrote to William Lane Craig. William Lane Craig is a scholar and philosopher who argues for the truth of Christianity. He often debates atheists or scholars from other religions. He has debated on college campuses around the world. He has written several books, and he has a website called reasonablefaith.org. You ought to check it out sometime. Part of his website that I enjoy is his question and answer page. People write in with their questions about faith, and he answers them. The following letter came from a student at Louisiana State University. Let me just say, before I read it, that I am not trying to make LSU look bad.

Westminster has a lot of ties to LSU. And although I prefer the Vols to win when they play the Tigers, I have nothing at all against LSU. The situation this student describes can be found at every large state university. I know it can be found at Alabama, because one of my colleagues in my doctor of ministry program got his undergrad degree from Alabama, and he has told me about it. I know it can be found at Tennessee because when I was in high school friends who went to Tennessee found the same thing. So I know this letter describes experiences common to Christian students on any campus. This guy just happens to go to LSU. He wrote:

Dr. Craig, I attend Louisiana State University and I am a student worker at our school's library. Of all the people I work with, half are agnostic and the other half are atheists. I became a born again Christian a little over a year ago after five years of atheism. I have noticed many young people believe, as I used to, that religion is stupid and there is no God. I don't even mention religion to my co-workers and some simply blurt out horrible things about religion/Christianity. I work with an Englishman who talked about his country being very nonreligious to the point where the mention of God is laughed at. America is also increasing in the number of non-believers. I am worried for our future. I don't know how to combat atheism. I am a Christian, I converted based on personal experiences, and I am not a philosopher. Atheists are grumpy and want answers, answers I don't have the time to find out. I am currently trying to earn three undergrad degrees at LSU and none of them are philosophy. How can a simple layman college student like myself become a decent defender of Christianity against these average college atheists. I will always defend my belief in Christ but they are looking for something more than what I believe. They say that believers are stupid and illogical so therefore I would like to argue based on logic and prove to them that believers aren't simply stupid. How does one who has no time to learn philosophy or read theology become a debater against these closed minded ranting non-believers?¹

Did you notice how this young man's agenda is similar to Luke's? He'd like to convince his friends that Jesus is Lord. Failing that, he would at least like them to see that Christians are not bad people.

Dr. Craig wrote a lengthy, thoughtful answer that is worth reading, especially if you find yourself in that situation. Most of us probably don't encounter that level of hostility often, but some of us might. If you want to read the answer, I printed a few copies. See me after the service. My interest in sharing this was not so much the answer as the question. It shows the situation we live in. It opens our eyes to what we might face, and what our children and/or grandchildren certainly face. Are we preparing them to handle it? Are we prepared ourselves?

¹ <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=8263> (accessed Sept 10, 2010)

The news is not all bad this morning. We are once again the New Testament church, and God used the New Testament church in a mighty way. Luke's friends stood firm and made a difference. And we will to. Our children will. How can I be so sure? Because God is working out a plan and a purpose. He advances the Good News about Jesus because that is how his love embraces our broken and hurting world. The church is his idea and his instrument. He is at work. If we learn nothing else from Luke, we ought to learn that.

We will always have one foot in two worlds. Always. Because God wants it that way. He has made us his people and given us a home, the church, so we always have one foot there. He loves the world, and he sends us out as his ambassadors, his missionaries into it. So we always have one foot there. The world outside the church will always see things differently. It will always be telling a different story, always pushing different values. That's life. Until Christ returns to make all things new, that's how it's going to be. We will always have one foot in two worlds.

The important question, then, is this: Which world gets to tell you who you are? ... Which world determines the way you look at things? Which world shapes your values? Which world gets the deciding vote in your heart, your mind, your conscience? Who are *you* going to be? Are you going to be the person your culture wants you to be? Or are you going to follow Jesus 100%?

There's no middle ground anymore. No hedging your bets. No sitting on the fence, trying to negotiate between the two, as if you could fit in and still love Jesus on the side. Think of that guy from LSU. If he joins his friends in attacking Christianity, he is no disciple at all. If he just keeps his mouth shut, he's not much of a disciple. He'd be like Peter in the courtyard of the high priest who denied knowing Jesus. On the other hand, if he speaks up, he doesn't fit in. That's the dilemma of being torn between two worlds.

Which world gets to tell you who you are? That's the question. I trust you know the answer. Amen.

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