

## *In Search of the Church: LUKE—Signs of the Kingdom*

This gospel was written around 80-90 AD and addressed the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation of Christians. Most of those in this community were Greek—both men and women—who had converted from something other than Judaism. By now, Christians were seen as a separate group from Judaism and in some ways, as a gentile movement.

This gospel addressed:

- The move from a Jewish sect to its own independent identity
- Provided more knowledge of history as the 1<sup>st</sup> person eyewitnesses had died
- Captured the connection between the past and the present—Jesus' relation to Judaism-→ Jesus' relation to the church
- The importance of women, treatment of the poor, the place of rich in the Kingdom of God
- Stressed that the church—the body of Christ—is called to be a sign of the Kingdom
- Stressed that in Christ, a new reality—the Kingdom of God—is unfolding

After Jesus' baptism he goes through his temptation in the wilderness. For Luke, this is a time in which Jesus discerns the most faithful manner in which to proclaim and live into the Kingdom. He rejects the **economic option**—feed the hungry—*Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone.* This is to insure that the Kingdom is not centered on our physical needs. He then rejected **the political option**—gaining the Kingdom through political or military means. *Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.* Finally he refuses to be "simply" a **miracle worker** attracting followers through supernatural power. *Jesus answered, "It says: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*

Jesus struggled with each of these options and rejects them as not of God. Luke is reminding us that we, like Jesus, will have to struggle to discern the will of God. Subsequently, Jesus returns to his hometown and reads from Isaiah and here proclaims what God would have him—and us—do.

*Luke 4:16-21* **16**He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. **17**The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: **18**"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, **19**to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." **20**Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, **21**and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

In this passage—Jesus' 1<sup>st</sup> proclamation—Jesus tells us that the Kingdom that he is bringing into our midst is concerned about the poor, the captive, the blind and the oppressed. All those on the margin of society are at the heart of God's vision of the Kingdom. It seems that special honor is given to women since they are the ones who are the 1<sup>st</sup> ones to witness the resurrection. Furthermore, there is an economic edge to this in that **4:19** makes reference to the Jubilee (*Leviticus 25:8-17*)—the time in which all debts are cancelled so that the gap between the rich and poor would never be permanent. The Year of Jubilee was meant to be celebrated every 50 years. It included canceling all debts, freeing all slaves, and returning to its original owners all land that had been sold. While there is no indication in the Bible that the Year of Jubilee was ever carried out, if

Israel had followed this practice faithfully, theirs would have been a society without permanent poverty.

This 1<sup>st</sup> "sermon" calls into question the cultural understanding of prosperity and success, not to mention who and what the Messiah might be. The early church, like us, struggled with this call to be unlike the world and culture around us. We, as the church and in the church, are to be a sign of the in-breaking reign of God, not the dominant culture around us. The heart of Jesus' message and mission is seen in the question from John the Baptist prior to his death. He wonders if Jesus is really the Messiah. Jesus doesn't defend himself or give any theological argument, but simply says tell them what you have seen. What I said at the outset is coming to pass:

*"Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. 23 Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."*

In Luke, the faith communities were to be signs of God's Kingdom. What Jesus announced, what Jesus did, was what the church was (and is) called to do. As Jesus showed his authenticity to John the Baptist, we are held to the same standards. We are to be a sign of the Kingdom.

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### **Luke's Implications for us:**

In his focus on the kingdom and those at the margins of society, Luke also focuses on money. He understands the power that money and wealth have over us who struggle to follow Christ. In his words regarding wealth and money, he continually asks us to identify with those who are economically poor. The prosperity gospel proclaimed by some churches says that those who **have** and blessed and woe to those who don't. Yet we pay a price for our consumer habits. Quite often, much of our income goes to debt service such that we, unintentionally, we **do tithe**, but to **VISA**, not the church.

Luke would have us make money a legitimate focus of our faith and discipleship. Could it be that the main reason that God calls us to tithe "is to protect us from consumerism"? Though we are by nature very private about personal finances and money (and isn't that isolation and insecurity about what we have or don't have what tends to get us in trouble?), we really need the help of the community to discern priorities, establish values, and make decisions. What would it mean in our lives if we could be more open and honest in our conversations about wealth, money, and its power over us? Might it help us spend more wisely and step outside of the consumer treadmill?

*Imagine belonging to a congregation where you could get some help with thinking about money; where you could begin to understand why you tend to adore the rich and condemn the poor; where people would help you resist the pressure in this society to measure who you are by what you own or what you can buy; where you could talk about debt and what to do about it. Such practice would not be seen as the church meddling in people's business but rather as the church giving appropriate and much needed care to some very important problems. p. 50*

- Does your giving to Good Shepherd adequately reflect your commitment to the parish?
- Looking at your budget, where does most of your money go? Does it reflect your priorities?
- Looking at our church budget, how does it reflect our priorities?
- Do you think many of our members are seriously in debt? How could and can the church help?