

Luke 1:1-4 - Why Luke? wk 1 of Series (Good News of Great Joy for All People)

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- [0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.
- Amen. What a beautiful song. What a great reminder to us that God speaks. That God speaks actually, as James was saying, our language.
- That he speaks into our lives, our individual stories, our corporate stories. Right where we are, particularly in those difficult places, you've heard him speak to you there.
- So that we can understand and know him. What a great gift that is. He has spoken, hasn't he? Just stop and think about that for a minute.
- God speaks. Isn't that amazing? God speaks in creation. He has spoken through the prophets for thousands of years.
- [1 : 03] He has spoken through his son. What a great privilege it is to hear God speak. The one who created and rules over everything would have something to say to us.
- Isn't that amazing? And if that's the case, we must do what? We must certainly listen. If God speaks, we must listen.
- We must listen to God speak expectantly, anticipating that we will find that our story is caught up in his. That he knows what's best for us.
- What a good time to consider that as we start a new sermon series this morning in the Gospel of Luke. Why don't we pray and ask God to help us hear as he speaks to us through his word.
- Pray with me. Father, thank you for speaking to us. Thank you for not standing far off and hiding yourself from us, but for speaking to us.
- [2 : 11] We often ask to hear from you and want that. And the truth is that you have spoken. And that you are speaking in your word.
- Lord, Holy Spirit, make us those with ears to hear. Bless our study of the Gospel according to Luke. For the sake of our own hearts.
- For our friends and our neighbors. For the city of Huntsville. And even, we pray, Father, in ways we couldn't anticipate or plan for, for the entire world.
- Speak now, Lord. Your servants are listening. Amen. Luke chapter 1 at verse 1.
- Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.
- [3 : 29] Thus far, God's holy word. This fall is going to include more than a new sermon series on the book of Luke.

Luke, it will, of course, involve a new football season. It's one of those things that happens this time of year that some of you are looking forward to. One of the greatest football coaches of all time, Vince Lombardi, is famous for some of his speeches.

One of them he delivered to his Green Bay Packers at the beginning of a new football season. They had just come off a year in which they lost the NFL championship game.

And there were many who doubted how things would turn out the next year. There was some discouragement in the locker room. Guys were uncertain how this next season was going to go after the rough end to the last one.

And Lombardi walked in that very first day. He held up a football and he took them back to the basics. He said, gentlemen, this is a football.

[4 : 31] Then they walked outside and he said, these are yard markers and that's an end zone. And this is how the game is played.

This is a football. It's the foundation, the center of the whole game. The game is about getting this ball across that line into that end zone.

We're going to start over and talk about football. No matter what else you do in football, the center of attention is the football, right?

That's simple. Lombardi knew it was simple. But it's also easy to forget, isn't it? A lot of stuff goes on. We get busy.

There's a lot of things to learn and remember and a lot of life to live and we forget. And one of the reasons I'm excited to study the gospel of Luke together is that Jesus is at the center of it.

[5 : 29] Now, of course, that is true of all of scripture. We'll talk more about that later. But it's true in a particular way of the gospels where we get detailed accounts of what Luke describes as the things that have been accomplished among us.

Verse 1. By which things, Luke clearly means the things that have happened in the life and ministry of Jesus. As we start to read, we realize that's what Luke is telling us about.

Jesus is so much the center of attention in the Bible that we actually get how many gospels? The kids helped us count them. Four gospels. Four gospels to give us different perspectives on the same thing, really.

The life and ministry and death and resurrection of Jesus. Four of them. That's unusual in biblical accounts. We get four different thorough lengthy perspectives on the life of Jesus.

Jesus is the word made flesh. The perfect image of God. We're told in God's word that we see in Jesus the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

[6 : 43] So that's what we're going to see in the book of Luke as we walk through this gospel. And nothing could be more important to us than getting a clear vision of Jesus, of the glorious God-man.

Luke says it's so important, in fact, that he doesn't just want us to hear some stories and pick and choose what we like, but to know the truth about Jesus with certainty.

Remember what he says? Why he's writing this book? Luke writes both this gospel and the book of Acts to someone named Theophilus.

You may not have a lot of friends named Theophilus. Luke had one. And he probably was a historical figure. Maybe had helped Luke fund this venture, writing this gospel account.

But he clearly had heard about Jesus and wanted to know more. He'd heard some things, perhaps, but he still had questions, doubts, struggles.

[8 : 02] Perhaps he didn't have it all figured out yet, and so Luke wrote this for him. Could we all admit this morning that we fit in that category with Theophilus?

I don't think any of us has Jesus all figured out yet, do we? Whether we grew up in the church or this is our first Sunday, I think we all have questions.

We all experience times where we lack certainty. Some of us have particular doubts or struggles. And Luke says to us, I get that.

I understand. This is big stuff. These are weighty things that have taken place. And I don't want to ignore your doubts or your questions, he says.

I want to seek to address those by considering what has happened here around me and what role Jesus plays in these events you've heard about. And before we do that, isn't that encouraging to you?

[9 : 03] Isn't it encouraging that the God of the Bible and the Bible itself would be okay with your doubts? That you can come into a room like this and a church like this and actually bring questions and struggles and doubts and God's okay with that.

In fact, that there are books in His Word like the book of Luke written to people who have doubts that God expects those kinds of people who don't have complete certainty will be there receiving His Word.

There are books written not to shame those struggling with doubt but to help them. You don't have to hide or deny your doubts. You don't have to remain stuck in them forever thinking I'll never learn anything or get any clarity.

You can bring them rather to God and to His Word. Let His Word speak to them. What good news that is that that's the kind of God we have and the kind of God who speaks to us in those doubts.

I believe nothing could be more important than what someone does with Jesus. What we believe about Him, how He impacts our lives.

[10 : 22] And you may not even be convinced of that this morning. But what a great opportunity if you're struggling or you're doubting to investigate Jesus Himself.

To see who He is and what He's about. Luke says these are important enough matters that He wants us to have certainty about what happened. So He's done careful research.

Look at verse 2. He describes it. Just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word have delivered them to us, It seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you.

Having looked into this, Luke says in beautiful Greek prose, he clearly introduces what claims to be history, not fiction.

Anyone who got this when Luke wrote it would know that these four verses introduce what is intended to be a detailed and careful historical account. He's writing almost certainly in the 60s.

[11 : 29] That's the 60s of the first century. Not the 1960s. The 60s. At most 30 or 40 years removed from the events that he describes.

So many of the people first reading Luke were people who were present or had parents present at the events that Luke is writing about. And he's saying, I'm not going to get away with tall tales here in this book.

Luke makes a claim to being careful and accurate. And he explains how he was able to be careful and accurate, right? Not only are there other written accounts he's consulted, but Luke goes back to eyewitnesses.

And talks with them. He traveled with some of them. Ministers of the word. These are oral accounts. From the historians of the cities in which these events happened.

You know, that's how they did them back in these days. Those were the things that people really trusted. It was the approved storytellers in each community. That when significant events happened, they told them better than anybody else and remembered exactly the way that they were.

[12 : 40] That's who Luke is talking about. He's talked with them. The people who pass down exactly how things happen. And everybody knows. So they don't change anything.

Because if they change something, everybody knows you're changing the story. That's not how it goes. That's not what happened. We were there. And the storyteller passes it down. Luke has talked with them. That's what it means.

That these stories that Luke is putting in his gospel were delivered. That they were passed down by these storytellers. Eyewitnesses to the events that had taken place.

And Luke wants you to know he's looked into it carefully. Luke had investigated these things carefully for the benefit of his readers. That they would be able to know what happened.

They would be able to know who Jesus was. And that's a question that comes up several times in Luke. Who is this? The book's about Jesus.

[13 : 40] And the question will come up, who is this guy? Who is this Jesus? And that's what we're going to learn together as we walk alongside him. And learn of him up close and personal walking through a gospel account.

In recent years, there have been multiple so-called quests for the historical Jesus. Now, I won't go into all the details of those this morning.

But you've probably heard about at least some of the more recent ones. Basically, there have been three main waves. First, back in the 1800s. Recently enlightened men.

They thought they knew better than 1800 years of history and theology. And they began regularly writing, many of them, what they believed to be the most likely things that were true about Jesus' life.

Here's the real Jesus. We're going to go on a quest and we're going to tell you who the historical Jesus really was. Another wave in the 1900s, primarily in Germany, had their own criteria for figuring out which things were likely to be true about Jesus and which things were not.

[14 : 51] And then a third wave that you will all have been exposed to without even knowing it, began in Europe and America in the 1970s and 80s. They used things in these quests for the historical Jesus that fit their assumptions.

Assumptions that they make about Jesus and about what's likely or not likely to be true. I'll just give you an example that some would use. They would say that something like Jesus performing miracles is very unlikely.

Right? That doesn't make sense. That those things don't happen in our naturalistic world. So a miracle, not likely to be historical.

However, almost all of them agree that this man named Jesus did live and that the Romans did actually crucify him. And so because of that, anything that this man Jesus said that would cause him to get put to death by the Romans, more likely to be true.

That sounds like the historical Jesus. That's the one we know. The one the Romans killed. So if he said something that might have led to that, it might be true. And so what they do is they come up with their historical Jesus and then they write annual cover stories in various magazines that you'll see.

[16 : 09] Telling us who Jesus really was. And Luke says, listen, how about the 60s?

How about the first 60s? Let me tell you about the historical Jesus from people who walked and talked with him. Eyewitnesses, written accounts, oral historians.

An account tested on the original audience, not on my own personal assumptions about what Jesus would have been like. Luke says, I want you to know with certainty something you can count on.

So Jesus is at the very center of Luke's gospel and that's exciting for us to get to dive into together. But another reason I'm excited about studying Luke is that Jesus turns things upside down.

I don't mean upside down like the tables of the money changers in the temple, although he does that. But rather what I mean is that as we get to know more about this Jesus, we will likely realize he's not exactly what we would expect.

[17 : 16] He's going to challenge some of our assumptions, both personally and socially, to upend some of our comfortable lifestyles.

Now I need to confess up front that those of you who know me are already thinking, he said he was excited about this. That doesn't sound like something Will would be excited about. Having his safe, predictable, comfortable life.

Those are adjectives that describe me well. I'd much prefer staying safe and predictable and comfortable. Not having things upended and turned upside down.

But I'm excited about this because the Jesus we meet in Luke is very practical. And he's not going to leave us where we are just content with the status quo.

And I'm tired of the status quo. Of just seeing things going crazy all around me and thinking, oh well, I'm just going to stay the way I am. I don't really know anything better.

[18 : 17] I don't merely want to play church. And to come on Sunday and act like there's something important, but live the rest of life as though it makes no difference. I want to have my life and our community together reshaped after the design of King Jesus.

And Luke is going to challenge us there. What does it really mean to say we're Christians? Does it make a difference to profess that I'm following Jesus?

What would that really mean for us? You see, what happens in Luke is that Jesus comes and brings over and over a kingdom in word and in deed.

Indeed, we're going to see this time and again that Jesus' kingdom comes in word and in deed. It sounds different from what people are used to hearing. And it looks and feels different from what people expect.

And so we're going to learn about the priorities of his kingdom that are radically countercultural both in his day and in ours. Let me give you just one example of this this morning.

[19 : 28] It's the way Jesus values people. The people who are important in his kingdom. It's not what you would naturally expect. You see, if you thought about a religious leader coming in 2,000 years ago who wanted to be influential and start a movement, especially if you thought it was the son of God himself in the flesh, you'd think he'd hang around with the important people, wouldn't you?

With the upper class, well-connected religious leaders of the day. Not so with Jesus. That's not where we find him.

In Luke, there's this paradoxical reality that Jesus focuses on the least and the lost and the left out. Somehow the least of these get his greatest attention and compassion.

Somehow it's the lost whom he seems most eager to find and spend time getting to know. Somehow it's the left out that get welcomed in to Jesus' inner circle and to the essence and central spot in his kingdom.

The title for this sermon series, Good News of Great Joy for All People, comes, you may recognize, from the message of the angel to the shepherds in Luke 2.

[20 : 52] The angel comes and says to the shepherds, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

The coming of Jesus is announced as good news for all sorts of people. People especially like the lowly, marginalized, poor shepherds who hear about it first.

In Luke chapter 19, Jesus announces in what becomes a thematic verse, what's his mission? He has come to seek and to save the lost.

Not to see how much time he can spend hanging out with those who already have it together. Just think of some of the most familiar people we will meet in Luke. People who get Jesus' time and attention.

Beside the lowly shepherds, Jesus praises a sinful woman. He moves toward the hated tax collector Zacchaeus. He looks to help a blind beggar on the side of the road.

[22 : 05] He takes time to care for a grieving widow. He brings relief to a demon-possessed man. Over and over, he's intentionally engaging with people you might not have expected.

In fact, two of his most memorable stories in the book of Luke that you'll recognize the names of are about a prodigal son who's lost his way and a good Samaritan.

The Jews didn't even know that there was such a thing as a good Samaritan in those days. Consistently, it's undeserving outsiders who never would have seemed to have a place who will find themselves as honored insiders in Jesus' kingdom.

The holy God comes to earth and we find him with some of the most impure sinners in the world. That's more than a little upside down.

It throws our thinking off. It upsets our expectations. It's going to challenge us to consider how we view ourselves. Do we view ourselves as lost or found?

[23 : 18] As religious outsiders or insiders? As wretched sinners or decent upstanding citizens? Then, of course, if you haven't figured it out already, it's going to challenge us to consider how we relate to others.

Do we even relate to the same kinds of people that Jesus loved to relate to? Whether we really believe the good news of Jesus is for all sorts of people.

Whether the message of the kingdom really feels like great joy for all the people that we would ever come in contact with. Everyone God would send us to.

Does it feel like there's a message of great joy for them? It's going to challenge us. Luke's going to upset our expectations and challenge us out of our comfort areas to where Jesus goes to follow him there.

But as life-altering as Jesus is in Luke and as meeting him should be for us, it's not ultimately about us and how our lives become different.

[24 : 31] That's not the point of Luke as we've noticed already. The neat thing, though, is that Jesus is so at the center of Luke that even as he turns things upside down, he remains at the center.

See, of all the upside down or paradoxical things in the gospel of Luke, the most profound and dramatic is that the eternal Son of God dies.

That the promised Messiah King suffers. That the one the angel spoke of as bringing great joy actually endures unspeakable grief.

It's important to know this from the beginning because it impacts the entire story as we pick up at verse 5 next week and start moving a little bit faster than this morning.

Where that story is going impacts everything leading up to it. There are going to be stories of Jesus' birth, his teaching, his miracles, and much more.

[25 : 42] But they all are a part of a story that has Jesus coming as a Savior headed to a cross. This theme comes up time and again in Luke because you know who doesn't forget how important it is?

Jesus. Even early in his ministry, we hear him coming back to the importance of this. Luke chapter 9 is only one example to show you. He tells his disciples, the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised.

This is not the night before the cross. This is early in Jesus' ministry with the men who've just begun to follow him. And Jesus says, let me remind you of something really important.

These things must happen. This is where we're headed. This is where this is going and it colors everything that happens all the way through the book of Luke. The cross is the heartbeat of Jesus' mission.

He keeps telling his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem. That he must suffer. That he must die. That's what it means that a Savior is coming. Not some political deliverer to conquer the Romans.

[26 : 59] Not some social revolutionary to empower the poor. But a Savior to die for our sins. That's what we need and that's who Jesus is.

And we will celebrate that every single time we open the Gospel of Luke. Luke is not the only place, of course, where that's who Jesus is.

That's the great story of Scripture from beginning to end, right? That the God who created this entire world and created us to be his image bearers in it.

That we would fill the earth with his glory from where he's placed us to the ends of the earth. The story of the Scripture is that he's working to fix what's broken.

That he is at work to redeem and to restore the things that have been lost and marred in his creation.

[27 : 55] And through the Old Testament we see it promised for thousands of years. That there's someone coming who's going to be at the center of this whole story. And make it all possible. And that person is now here.

Luke says it in his first verse. In as much as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us.

If you were here last week I told you about the divine passive. We've got another one this morning. That passive verb. Who has accomplished these things? God has accomplished things among us.

That's what Luke is saying. That word, what's been accomplished is saying that what's been promised for thousands of years. The one you've been waiting for.

All those promises have been accomplished. Have been fulfilled. That's what's happened and that's why you need to know about it. The glorious God who's made these great promises has now fulfilled them through Jesus.

[29 : 04] God is doing what he's promised. The story is coming to its culmination. He's finally sent the one you've been waiting for. You see the gospel in general and Luke in particular is not a story about all the wonderful things we've done or should do.

But rather it's a story about what God has done. That we can find our own stories caught up in and reshaped by. Because that's really the great story.

Jesus really is the center of the great story of all of history, of all of scripture. And he's worth shaping your life around.

See we naturally try to put ourselves at the center, don't we? Our own stories are what's most important to us. And so we're constantly frustrated and not deeply fulfilled.

Things don't work out the way we expect them to. And that's because we're trying to put the earth at the center of the solar system rather than the sun.

[30 : 11] When the sun is at the center, the earth finds its right place, right? I'm resisting all sorts of sun puns right now.

You're welcome. But when Jesus is at the center and your story revolves around him, you actually find the truest meaning, the deepest fulfillment, who you were actually created to be, what the creator of the universe intended for you and where he intended your special place in his story to be a part comes when Jesus is at the center of your story.

And so we're going to find him there. Let's go back to Vince Lombardi for a second. Gentlemen, this is a football.

And so going back to what's really the center of attention in the game is what's most important. Anyone who's played or watched football knows how important the football is, right?

Think about it this way. You can block stronger. You can run faster. You can execute better than the other team. But if you lose track of this, you will not score and you will not win.

[31 : 33] It could be a wide receiver who has beaten the coverage and is running free behind everybody for a touchdown but drops the ball. It could be a running back who has broken through the defense, headed for the end zone, but drops the ball at the one-yard line.

You've been there. Your team has done that. You've yelled at the television, hang on to the football. It's not that hard. Just hang on to it tight, right?

It's so frustrating. We're so much better, but we just can't hold on to the ball. It's really, really important. If you don't hold on to it, the game is lost.

If you don't focus on the football, you've missed the whole point. And here's the beauty of what we get to experience together. Page after page, week after week, Luke says to us, Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, this is Jesus.

Don't lose track of him. Don't let go of him. I don't just want you to know some things about him. I want you truly to know him.

[32 : 47] As he speaks, listen to him. As he goes to the cross, cling to him desperately. As he rises from the grave to live forever, worship him.

Don't lose sight of him. Hang on tight to him or you'll miss the whole point. But hang on, cling to him, and you'll have everything you need.

I was going to call this series in Luke the historical, paradoxical, upside down, life-changing, true story of Jesus to remind us that it's about him, but it didn't fit really well in print.

It was a little long. But you're still going to hear me say that from time to time because I don't ever want us to forget that every story we're reading is about him.

Every story has him at the center. He himself is the good news. Luke 2 makes that really clear and it doesn't change the rest of the gospel.

[33 : 54] The good news is Jesus is coming. It's because of who he is and what he has done for us on the cross that Luke is good news of great joy for all people and that includes you and me.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Father, your word shows us Jesus every time we open it, but what a great joy to be able to read together and study together about his life and particularly about what he has done for us.

Father, don't let that be something that's tangential to us that just touches our lives in a single place on a single day and then leaves them unchanged.

We believe that your spirit will work in such a way as we encounter Jesus that we will be different people and that scares the pastor who doesn't like change.

But Father, we need that. We need to meet Jesus and to be forever different because of it. So for those of us who have known him for a long time but still struggle with what that looks like, for those who are doubting and struggling and aren't sure what to make of a book like this, would you show us Jesus and would you make us different because we have met with him.

[35 : 26] We pray in his name. Amen. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.