

Series: Doctor's Notes: Themes in Luke and Acts
Sermon: Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church
Lydia Collin
Delivered to Trinity Presbyterian Church, September 5th, 2021

I've titled our four week series *Doctor's Notes* because we are going to be reading the notes or the story of the doctor Luke who wrote, in his own words, "An orderly account" of all that Jesus began to do and teach. The New Testament is written by ordinary people who are fishers, Roman citizens with outstanding education, tax collectors, little known individuals, and also Luke, the physician. As a physician, he is very concerned about order, details, the big picture, and an accurate telling of the life of Jesus. I'm not saying you have to be like me to appreciate Luke, but if you're someone who appreciates things in order, a well written novel, and a mix of artistry with science or facts with imagination . . . Luke is for you!

But, as we get started this morning, I think I need to explain that this first sermon will be heavier on teaching than preaching. I think of preaching as stirring our hearts and minds to love Jesus in how we live; and I think of teaching as building the context and basis of our faith. This morning, we will mostly be setting the context for Luke so that when we dive into specific elements of his writing, we will have a bit of the bigger picture of how his "orderly account" is written.

Jim Elliot - Opening Story

The missionary Jim Elliot kept a journal through his college years and into his missionary deployment in Ecuador before being tragically killed by the violent tribe he was trying to reach. Jim's journal has been widely read by many Christians and I remember reading it as a teen. Jim's private confessions, ponderings, and spiritual experiences had a real impact on my spiritual formation. I remember an observation that Jim continually made in his journal that **the more he read the Old Testament, the more he understood the New Testament**. If people read their bibles at all these days, it's sadly just favourite verses here and there, perhaps, if you're lucky, an entire epistle, or for the rare few the entire New Testament. But, the Old Testament just seems confusing and irrelevant. Maybe

we read the Psalms, a few favourite quotes from the minor prophets, or recall the Sunday School stories of David and Goliath or Samson; but when we think of the Old Testament, we think of an angry God, a violent God, and rules that make it impossible to follow God. The problem is that when we dismiss or fail to understand the Old Testament, we also will misunderstand the New Testament.

Luke in Context

As we come to the New Testament writer, Luke, this reality is even more shockingly true. Luke is writing to an audience who understands these past 5000 years. Luke is writing to these people and he's not writing to us. I think that's a pretty bold sentence, and so let me explain what I mean.

Luke could never have imagined a 21st century Christian: how we would think, how our culture would function, what we would be interested in as a society, and what has happened in history for the last 2000 years that has shaped who we are today. It's not too far to say that Luke could have never imagined feminism: in his day women weren't even given the status of human! Luke could never have imagined democracy: in his day it was the supreme rule of Rome. Luke could have never imagined modern medicine: in his day, his best bet at saving a life was a few simple herbs.

And so in today's world, if we want to understand Luke, we not only have to give a sense of sympathy to the time that has passed since he wrote Luke and Acts, but we also have to dig back into the Old Testament to understand the cultural background of why he writes so much about things like prophecy, or like how wild of an idea it is that Luke actually introduces 50 prominent women characters in his storytelling, why Luke is so interested in locations and places (especially Jerusalem!), and why Luke is so set on talking about the third person of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit.

So, if we want to understand Luke, we have two tasks: one, to understand what the world was like for Luke in the first century, and second to understand the foundation the world in Luke's day was built upon. But there's a third obstacle for us, too, and it's this: Luke's story has been chopped into two books in the arrangement of the New Testament and they are separated by John's Gospel. This arrangement encourages us to read Luke and Acts as two unrelated books,

which was never Luke's original intention. Let me explain. Take Victor Hugo's famous work *The Hunchback of Norte Dame* as an example. It is written in 3 volumes but it is one story. Hugo's story doesn't make sense if you only have one volume! And it's the same for Luke. He doesn't want us to separate what Jesus did and what the Holy Spirit did into two separate accounts: it's one ongoing story. What would it look like to see what Jesus does in Luke being repeated and continued on in Acts? How would it change your understanding of Luke's writing, the content of both books, and what both books mean for us today? I want to intentionally close this gap as we journey together.

Now, you may have noticed a bit of a subtle theme within the four titles of these sermons. We focus on something about Jesus and then see it repeated in the life of the Church. Put another way, we see something in the Gospel of Luke that is repeated in Acts. For today, it will be how Jesus is prophetic and then how the church is prophetic. As Jesus lived, so we live.

And so, let me be up front with you that our initial challenge even before we dive into today's topic is that just as Jesus emphasizes something, so the early church emphasized it, and so must we emphasize it. There's a continuation of thought, a pattern, a repetition. There is one story being told throughout all of history. Sadly, we can easily miss this intentional repetition when we separate Luke and Acts. The risk when we do that is that both these books become stories that do not repeat themselves in the life of the church today. Rather than one continuous story, we split the stories up and find ourselves not living in that same story as the church today.

In my initial teaching, I suppose, before we even get to preaching, I am trying to encourage us today to see the unity of the story of Jesus. Jesus remains the same forever and ever. Heaven and earth may pass away, but God's word will abide forever. We can't separate our life from the life of Jesus or the life of the early church.

So, that is the initial teaching portion of today. We know that we need to read and study the Old Testament if we want to understand Luke, and in order to help us see the ongoing work of Christ today, we need to start reading Luke's writing as one story in two volumes: the Gospel and the book of Acts.

Alright, so how does Luke, the physician, write? The way Luke tells his story is by weaving repeating themes into his book. Think of it as different colours in a garment being woven on a loom that make a pattern or design. We call these themes motifs, which gives us another word picture for how Luke writes. A motif is a musical word meaning a pattern that is repeated over and over, or changed slightly. It's how we write a melody to a song, repeating and turning that melody around so that the song has a flow and a unity to it (sing the example of *Amazing Grace*). Luke has dozens of motifs!

For example, did you know that Luke mentions money 70 times in his writing? That's right! That alone should give us pause to stop and consider why Luke would have such an interest in the economic dimensions of life. Luke also weaves other motifs into his work, such as fish, generosity, the Kingdom of God, angels, visions, servants, centurions, clothing, tears, anger, the wilderness, and many more. You could probably spend 3 to 4 years just going through the motifs! But for us, we're just going to focus on four, one each week. They are: prophecy, women, geography, and the Holy Spirit.

Alright, that is an overview of Luke set in the context of all of God's word and a bit of insight into how he writes, which will set a framework for our four weeks of looking at four motifs in Luke.

If you're starting to catch this rhythm and context for how Luke writes, you'll be in good standing for our first motif, which is prophecy, because, news flash: the idea of a prophet is pretty unrecognizable and strange today, wouldn't you agree?

Prophecy in Context

That's why in order to understand how Luke uses the motif of prophecy in his storytelling, we need to back up and understand what prophecy meant both in Luke's day and in the Old Testament. What did it mean to be a prophet 2000 years ago, and what did it mean to be a prophet 5000 years ago? So, let me invite you to just pause and think for a moment, or perhaps share with the people who may be taking part of this service with you in your home: what do you think of when you hear the word prophecy? Here are some suggestions:

- Someone who tells future events

- Someone who hears directly from God
- A gift of the Spirit Paul talks about
- Somebody not minding their own business and meddling in your personal affairs
- A churchy word we use but don't really know what we're talking about

Well, surely if we want to understand prophecy today, we need to understand prophecy in Luke's day, but even before that, we need to understand prophecy in the time of the Old Testament because that is the foundation Luke works off of. So here we're getting down to the nuts and bolts.

Big Idea

I often use what I call a "Big Idea" in my sermons. One takeaway that gets woven and teased out and applied. And so today's big idea may surprise us and it's this: Luke's idea of prophecy is not just telling the future, but calling people back to God.

It may surprise us to learn that the prophets of the Old Testament, people like Jeremiah, Isaiah, Micah, Malachai, Obadiah, and Zechariah, it may surprise us that their main job as a prophet was not to tell the people what was about to happen but to remind them of their history, their roots, their God, and their story. The prophet's main role in the Old Testament is not looking forward to future events or forecasting the future like a weatherman. They were oriented to the past not to the future. That is, the prophet's job was to remind the people of their past so that they would live differently in the here and now. That's not to say that the prophets didn't foretell what was to happen, because they certainly did, especially when it comes to prophecies about the coming Messiah. But, their primary job was to call the people of God to repent by reminding them who God is, what the covenant between them and God is, and what they need to do to keep that covenant.

Prophecy as Looking Back

The story of what's happening in Israel during the times of the prophets is that Israel has forgotten Yahweh. They have forgotten their story. They have forsaken their God, and have been exiled as a result. They no longer live in the city of promise, the city of Jerusalem, but because they broke the covenant with Yahweh, the conditions of the covenant also must be broken. So God gives

Israel their heart's desire and lets them leave him. They are no longer living under God's blessing but have asked to live away from God, and the result is that they are taken into exile by other kingdoms, the Assyrians and Babylonians. And it is at this time that God, in his mercy, sends prophets to remind Israel of their story. The prophets say, "Remember, O Israel, the God of your ancestors. The God who longs to bless you, to make your life full of meaning, and to make you a blessing to other nations. But, you have forsaken him. Come back, O Israel." This is the job of the prophet.

Malachai is the last prophet to speak in the Old Testament. His final words and the last words of the Old Testament are "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statues and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel." Malachai calls Israel to remember God and then he writes this, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction." (Malachai 4)

And then the word of the Lord is silent for 400 years. The prophets told Israel to remember and to prepare for the coming of one like Elijah . . . but Israel carries on as they did before and there is no prophetic word spoken for 400 years.

It is in this background that Luke speaks of prophecy in his writings. Luke's use of prophecy is like glue that holds the Old Testament and New Testament stories together. Luke connects the story of Jesus and the church to Israel in a specific way, through telling the story of God's continuing saving activity through prophetic word and actions.

So, when you first open the book of Luke, what are the very first stories and characters that are introduced? That's right! They are prophets! In Luke 1, the angel Gabriel prophesies to Zechariah, Mary, and the shepherds about Jesus, the Saviour who will make the covenant right between Israel and God. Mary, the mother of Jesus, speaks prophetically about who this Jesus is in her womb. Elizabeth, Mary's cousin and the mother of John the Baptist, speaks prophetically about the God of Israel visiting and redeeming his people. Here, in the opening stories of Luke, he introduces prophets who do very specific things.

1. They are inspired by the Spirit to speak God's word, calling people back to God
2. They show the people how to live into this story they are calling the people to remember.

Mary shows us both these truths. She speaks prophetically about who Jesus will be, and she lives as the servant of the Lord. Anna, who proclaims in the temple that this baby Jesus is the one the prophets spoke of, lives a life of holiness and devotion. So, as these women speak prophetically (and spoiler alert, the fact that they're women is a big deal, which we'll get into next week!), they prepare and announce the coming of the true prophet, and not just a prophet--but God himself.

I wish we had time to walk through all of Luke to see Jesus as prophet. Continually throughout the Gospel, Jesus will tell Israel that the scriptures, that which was spoken by the prophets, must be fulfilled in him. In Luke 20:17 he quotes Psalm 118 in saying that he is the stone that the builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone. In Luke 22:37 he says that the scriptures must be fulfilled in him, where he will be numbered with the transgressors, or where he will become sin that we might become righteous. Jesus fulfills prophecy by embodying it. On the cross, we behold Jesus as the One who takes away the sin of the world! And, even after Jesus' resurrection, on the road to Emmaus with two disciples, Jesus unpacks the law and the prophets to show them that he is the Christ.

In the New Testament, it has been shown that Jesus fulfilled some 351 Old Testament prophecies about himself, so we see that Jesus not only acts as a prophet in calling people back to the one true God, but that he also fulfills prophecies of the saviour who alone could bring people back to this same God. All of history past and history yet to be written is tied up and makes sense in this man, Jesus. And it's for this very reason why we can't understand the New Testament without being taken back into the story of the Old Testament, where it is prophesied that one must come to bring us back to God. But friends, the story of Jesus continues.

When Jesus is raised from the dead, the story of his prophetic word and work carries on immediately in Acts 1:8, when Jesus himself prophesies that his disciples will receive power from on high as they take on the mantle of bearing witness to Christ in their hometowns and to the farthest parts of the earth.

We see this continuation of the Prophetic Jesus living into the Prophetic Church when on the day of Pentecost, Peter boldly declares that the prophecy of Joel has been fulfilled as the Spirit of God is being poured out all on all flesh-- both sons and daughters! The early church lives in the prophetic: they too, by the power of the Spirit, call people back to God and welcome, even the Gentiles into this kingdom.

In Acts, the church functions prophetically as she calls people to this one true God and then lives into this very calling by the way they love, serve, and give. To be a prophet is to say, "Come with me, come back with me to this one great love. Let's go together to the place where love and justice meet, where our sins are forgiven, where our lives are transformed, where hope is reborn. Come with me to Christ."

So where does leave us, the church today? Well, let me give a challenge and a summon to you.

Application

First of all, the challenge. If we want to understand Jesus as prophet and the church as prophetic, it comes with a catch. We have some work to do. It is not enough to read your favourite verses from the old testament prophets. "I know the plans I have for you, to give you a future and a hope," those are the words of Jeremiah. "He will quiet you in his love, he will rejoice over you with singing," those are the words of Zephaniah. It is not enough to lift these out of context, think we understand the Old Testament, and then find ourselves "sinking in the deep end" of what Luke is talking about when he sees Jesus and the church as prophets. Let me be clear: I am not saying that to be a Christian who understands the bible that you need to go and get a masters of theology! No, you don't. But, it's not enough to think that we understand the story that we are called to live into if we fail to read and study the story for itself, rather than picking our favourite verses here and there. If we keep doing this as a church, we will starve ourselves to death! Rather than picking at crumbs from the table, we are

welcomed to the full banqueting table: to feast on the full story of Christ in all his word.

It's no wonder the Bible seems so inaccessible to us today when we don't give it the time it needs and the attention it needs to understand and live today. So be a student of the Bible, not just a casual cherry picker of favourite verses. Take the time to make that same realization as Jim Elliot, that the more you study the Old Testament, the more you understand the New Testament.

And secondly, let me leave us with a summon. The prophets call Israel back to God. Jesus calls anyone and everyone back to God. The early church calls both Jew and Gentile back to God. But what about you? Our culture has forgotten and forsaken the notion of a God big enough to encompass all our beauty and all our pain. They have forgotten a God who cares so deeply for creation that he would set us up as her caretaker. They have been misled by a cheap Christianity that touts itself for political gain or personal gain . . . leaving what they see of the church today to be a shoddy excuse for a glorious, prophetic, and vibrant church. So be a prophet today who calls people back to the living God, the God who suffered and died to bring us back from nonbeing and into being--into life in Jesus.

Take the time to understand the story we are called into, and then live into that story as a prophetic people of God who, by the way you live and love, calls people to witness the beauty and grace and healing of this man Jesus, to whom all the prophets point, and who is our future and living hope today.

Benediction

Children of God,

Called to Jesus, the one who calls us brings us into the story of life, hope, and truth,

Remember to center your life on Christ who continues to write the story of redemption in the church today by the presence of the Spirit, and who will guide you safely home.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13 NIV)