

Sermon: In The End Is The Beginning

King's Chapel, Boston

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Based on **Luke 1:1-4**

As prologues go, Luke's is just about perfect in terms of style, elegance, and technique. Of the four, this is the only Gospel where the writer spells out his purpose and methodology. Luke explains why he has written; he tells us he has considered all that came before in the oral tradition of eyewitnesses; and he tells us that he was careful in his investigations. His goal was to write an orderly account in order to pass along the faith accurately.

We have been reading from the Gospel of Luke throughout the current church year, and this **prologue** happens to be the **last** Lukan reading before Advent when we begin a *new* liturgical cycle. And *that* is one of the curious details of the Christian lectionary cycle: we begin at the end and we end at the beginning.

Luke's prologue is, in Greek, one long sentence. It uses words unique to the New Testament; *in fact*, some words are used only once in the Bible, right here. It's also full of ambiguity. When Luke talks about "the events that have been fulfilled," is he talking about the events of Jesus' ministry, or is he going further back to when God brought the Israelites up from Egypt? Is he even talking about Jesus, who isn't mentioned at all?

Luke himself was not an eyewitness to these events yet he assures us that his is an orderly, chronological account; if he investigated so many other sources, why write another one? He's either trying to correct the record, or add to it. Maybe these other accounts were deficient – perhaps no one ever interviewed Mary, the mother of Jesus, before. Maybe there *was* room for improvement – Luke *did* make it into the canon...

Finally, what **truth** does Luke want to convey?

At this time of year, in this hemisphere, daylight is in short supply. Lots of people commute to and from work in the dark. The ancient Celts experienced the approach of winter as the world shutting down to rest after the harvest. The end was

coming but they had learned that in the darkest day was a new beginning, so they celebrated with bonfires and dancing and joy. They let their home fires burn down, and then ritualistically re-lit them with the flames of the community bonfire.

But why put the first words of Luke's Gospel at the very end of the church year? Like the Celts celebrating the solstice, perhaps we have a need to close the loop. It's not even Thanksgiving and the Christmas lights are popping up all over our neighborhoods. The big push to go shopping is right around the corner. More importantly, now is the time when we begin to reflect on how well (or not) our year has gone; who we've lost and who we've gained. We wonder what we might have done differently. We consider the personal ramifications of having successfully completed another trip around the sun.

At the end of the liturgical church year – now – we come back to the beginning, to pass along the faith accurately, to start over with the new birth, to live into a new hope for the future, a future that includes the expected return of Jesus Christ.

The prophet Jeremiah proclaimed, “Thus says the Lord, ‘Again I will rebuild you, and you shall be rebuilt!’” Luke tells us that he is about to build the case that Jeremiah was right – our faith and hope would be rebuilt with Jesus as the cornerstone.

I think Luke is writing with faith that God acts in history and he intends his report to be a true account of God's actions through Jesus Christ.

Luke's most excellent friend Theophilus – and we – need a historically and theologically reliable report of the Christ event. Luke was writing to a specific person whom we can never accurately identify, but when we read the story, which we've heard and known before, we can hope that Luke was thinking of us too. And that by hearing the story of this itinerant preacher from the broken yet defiant province of Galilee, our faith might be built again, as the prophet Jeremiah said, and the vineyard replanted in a new beginning in which we can all enjoy the fruits of the harvest.

For great is his steadfast love towards us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever (Psalm 117).

Amen.