

Reading Guide Week 3

St. Luke Part 2: Luke 4:14-9:50

The Ministry of Jesus in Galilee

Introduction: Luke 4:14-30

After the Infancy Narratives, which serve as an “overture” to the Gospel, St. Luke presents the ministry of Jesus in three settings (like scenes in a play): Galilee, the journey to Jerusalem, and Jerusalem itself. We begin in Galilee.

After being tempted in the desert by the devil, Jesus returns to Galilee to begin his public ministry. Luke provides an opening scene which both introduces and summarizes that ministry. Jesus is in the synagogue of Nazareth, his home town, reading a passage from Scripture. He tells his neighbors that the passage, from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, is about him:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord." - Luke 4:18-19

This passage reinforces what Luke has already told us about Jesus: He is the Messiah (the anointed one), the spirit of God has been given to him (we saw this at his baptism), and he is the fulfillment of Old Testament promises (to heal the sick and free the oppressed). The neighbors of Jesus really do not see him as anyone special and basically challenge Jesus to prove himself. But performing miracles on demand is not the purpose of his ministry, so the people are disappointed as Jesus goes elsewhere.

Jesus at Capernaum: Luke 4:31-44

Capernaum was a small village on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. It is here we find Jesus driving out demons and curing diseases. Today, people are skeptical about demons and miracle cures. It is not how we think. People 2000 years ago thought about sickness differently than we do. They saw sickness as the work of evil spirits or demons. We should not be put off by their primitive understanding of disease. Then as now, people were sick in mind as well as body. What St. Luke is telling us, and what all the other Gospels testify to, is that Jesus was able to heal those suffering from mental and physical ailments. He was able to do this because “the spirit of the Lord” was upon him. Ironically, the evil spirits recognized who he was even though his neighbors in Nazareth did not.

The Call of the Disciples: Luke 5:1-6:16

Jesus continues his ministry in Galilee by calling on people to help him. Notice that Jesus did not call the highly educated, or the privileged, or the most respectable. He called ordinary people and even those, like tax collectors, who were not respectable. Notice their response. It reminds us of Mary's response to the angel Gabriel. They simply said "yes." They "left everything and followed him."

Jesus continues to heal. Those suffering recognize that Jesus has the power of God and they have faith in him. In response to being healed they praise God. Luke also tells us about Jesus's encounters with the religious authorities, the Pharisees, who were experts in religious law. This is another way Luke helps the reader understand who Jesus is. Jesus interprets the law and forgives sins with the authority that God has given him. Luke helps us understand why Jesus was sent. He was sent not for the healthy, but for the sick, not for the righteous, but for sinners. This does not go over well with the religious authorities.

The Sermon on the Plain: Luke 6:17-49

The next part of Luke's gospel presents a summary of the teaching that was part of Jesus's ministry. The "Sermon on the Plain" is similar to the "Sermon on the Mount" in St Matthew's gospel. The Gospels often help us to understand the teaching of Jesus by presenting it from a number of viewpoints. Luke presents the Sermon in a very down to earth way ("Blessed are you who are poor") while Matthew presents a more spiritual sense ("Blessed are the poor *in spirit*"). Both outline the way God wants us to live.

God wants us to be concerned with the poor and hungry and to help them. God wants us to love each other, including our enemies and to be forgiving of them. God wants the foundation of our lives to be the commandments he has given us. He will recognize our obedience to the commandments by the good works which we do.

Healing the sick, forgiving sins, and parables: Luke 7:1-8:56

We learn more about Jesus as his healing ministry continues. The healing of the centurion's slave shows us that Jesus has been sent not only to the Jews, but also to gentiles who have faith in Jesus. The raising from the dead of the widow's son demonstrates the extent of the power that Jesus has been given. The people glorify God and recognize that "God has visited his people."

Luke then reminds his readers of the role of John the Baptist as the forerunner of Jesus. Jesus has embodied what John foretold. At the same time, Luke points out that many have failed to understand the messages of both John and Jesus and found superficial reasons for rejecting them.

The pardon of the sinful woman is another demonstration of the universality of Jesus's ministry. His ministry extends to prostitutes who were normally considered beyond forgiveness. Jesus forgives the woman. Luke contrasts her faith and love toward Jesus

with the self-righteousness and indifference of the Pharisee who is his host. Women were among the followers and supporters of Jesus, something highly unusual in 1st century Judaism. Luke also uses the story to introduce Jesus's use of parables.

A parable is saying or story taken from the activities of everyday life and used as an analogy or metaphor to help people understand something of the mystery of the Kingdom of God. The parable of the sower suggests that Jesus teaching does not have the same effect on everyone. It is a warning to both listen to and act on the word of God. Jesus has granted the knowledge of the mysteries of the Kingdom of God to his disciples directly. For everyone else that knowledge is best understood through parables. But that knowledge is not automatic. Like the good seed of the parable it requires the fertile ground of a willing and understanding heart.

Chapter 8 ends with stories that illustrate Jesus power to save. He has power over nature and power over an overwhelming number of demons. His power to save can be accessed by faith alone as in the case of the woman who merely touched his garments with the expectation of being healed. Finally, nothing is beyond his power to save, not even death, as his raising of Jairus's daughter demonstrates.

Climax of the ministry in Galilee, The Transfiguration: Luke 9:1-50

Jesus expands his ministry by sending out his disciples to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. At the same time Luke relates Herod's question about Jesus, "Who is this about whom I hear such things?" Luke uses the question to both reinforce and expand the answer he has been providing for his readers.

Jesus is someone who cares for the hungry and has the power to feed them: He feeds 5,000. Discussion with the returning disciples leads to the question, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter responds that Jesus is the Messiah of God.

But this Messiah and the Kingdom of God he will initiate is not what most people expect. The "Son of Man" (Jesus's way of referring to himself as Messiah) will suffer, be rejected, and killed before confirming his identity by being raised from the dead. And in the Kingdom of God, unlike most kingdoms, "the one who is least among all of you is the one who is greatest."

The Transfiguration provides the climax to the ministry in Galilee. Luke opened the ministry in Galilee with the voice of God indicating Jesus as his son at Jesus's baptism. Here, on a mountain in Galilee, Peter, James and John witness a vision of Moses and Elijah with Jesus and hear the voice of God say, "This is my chosen Son, listen to him." Luke has framed the ministry of Jesus in Galilee with the voice of God telling us who Jesus is.

This vision is also a reminder that Jesus is a connection to, and a fulfillment of, the Old Testament. Moses and Elijah can represent "the Law and the Prophets" - the substance of Sacred Scripture recognized by the Jews of Jesus's time. Or they can also, as prophets,

represent the prophetic promise of the Old Testament. Either way, the Transfiguration helps us to understand the significance of Jesus.

The vision also serves as a transition to the next portion of Luke that we will study, the journey to Jerusalem. In verse 31 we read that Moses and Elijah converse with Jesus who “spoke of his **exodus** that he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem.”¹ The note in our New American Bible translation tells us that **exodus** as used here by Jesus refers to the “death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus that will take place in Jerusalem.” In the remainder of his gospel, Luke will teach us that the exodus of Jesus will be even more significant for us than the Israelite exodus from Egypt.

Questions for reflection

1. The sick approached Jesus with faith that he could cure them. Do we have such faith? Have I asked Jesus to heal my infirmities or drive out my demons?
2. We become followers of Christ with our Baptism. Do we recognize that each of us has been called by Him? How do I respond?
3. When I read the word of God, does it bear fruit in me?
4. In the revised words of the Mass, we say the words of the Centurion, “**Lord I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof,**” and recognize with him our unworthiness before God. We receive the Body of Christ as a gift of God’s grace. But do we share the faith of the Centurion?
5. How would you answer the question that Jesus asked his disciples,

“But who do **you** say that I am?”

S. Csontos, revision 1, 18 February 2016.

¹ This is the way the New American Bible translates this verse. Other translations have “departure” instead of “exodus.” In the original Greek the word used is *exodon* which can mean departure, but is also a clear reference to “the exodus” in the Old Testament.