

Sunday July 11, 2010
Speaker: Nancy Vamvakas

WHO DO YOU SAY I AM?

This morning, I want to start by asking you to think about your relationship with your spouse, your best friend or a sibling. How well do you think you know them? And how have you learned about them? It takes time to know someone well. We learn about people by watching how they live – we watch them in action, or we listen to stories about their lives. If you ask my children, they will tell you my rule!!! They can't even think of marrying someone until they have known them well and dated for at least one year, so that they can see how they live in all seasons of the year. In order to know someone, you need to see them live. While we probably all know someone who met and married their spouse within weeks or months, and things worked out well, generally, it is not so wise to commit to a long-term, personal love relationship with someone that you don't know well! In order to put your life in the hands of another, you need to know what kind of care you are going to receive.

This morning, I would like to share with you something I learned about getting to know God better, which has increased my trust in his love, and in his care for us.

Prayer:

Sovereign Lord, maker of Heaven and earth, creator of all;
You are the Alpha and the Omega. You are wisdom. You are truth. You are living truth. And you are truth incarnate. You came as Jesus of Nazareth, in order to show yourself to us in a way we could understand, and for that we are so thankful. Help us this morning to see truth, and not just see it, but understand it, embrace it and live it. We ask that you would remove our blinders, our prejudices. Help us see through the lies and the errors, and to start us on a journey to know you better. Amen.

The Gospel as a Biography

Some of you already know that I am currently a student at Tyndale Seminary, taking my Masters in Theological Studies. Each summer, when Ken has asked me to preach, I have shared with you something I learned over the last year that got me very excited. Something that I felt that EVERYONE needed to know! Something I wished I had known all along.

This year, the epiphany came in Dr. Johnson's Gospel of Luke class. Dr. Johnson was sharing a significant discovery from recent Biblical studies that has dramatically changed the way we read the Gospels – which are the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It is now commonly accepted among New Testament scholars that the Gospels should be classified and understood as Ancient Biographies. Which, without going too much into the technical details, which I would be hard-pressed to remember anyway, it means that the writer of an Ancient Biography, has in mind to paint a portrait of a person to help a reader know certain important things about that person. This is quite different from a modern biography where the author is more concerned with capturing the events of a person's life – generally in chronological order – and often to show how the events of a person's life shaped their decisions or who they grew up to be. But because he was writing an Ancient Biography, the writer of Luke selected and ordered the stories and teachings of Jesus specifically to paint a certain picture for the church of who Jesus is. Every line in the Gospel of Luke reveals

something about Jesus that the writer of Luke intended us to know, just as the writers of Matthew, Mark and John had something specific they wanted to share. As we read all 4, we have a richer and richer picture of God.

Now you may be thinking “That’s the most important thing you learned last year????” But it changes EVERYTHING!!!

When we read one of the Gospel books, we have to approach it primarily as revelation. It is God revealing himself to us – his character, his values, his heart – through the person of Jesus Christ. We must concern ourselves, when we read the Gospels, with getting to know Jesus. The individual stories are important, but it is the whole picture of Jesus we must first be concerned with!!!

I challenge you to read Luke over the next few weeks, and keep asking yourself, “What does this tell me about who God is?” If you have never done this, there is so much you would discover, as I did. If you really want a powerful experience, do it in one sitting. It takes about 1 ½ - 2 hours to read through, but it was the way it was intended to be heard. When you do that, there are patterns and repetitions that come through.

I would like to spend this morning, giving you some hints on what to look for, and some taste of what you will find. Just a little warning – I am not going to give you all the answers because a) I don’t have them all; b) it would take days to share just part of what God reveals, and c) I don’t want to give you any reason not to do this yourself!!! Studying the Bible is a lifelong process of discovery, and I want to encourage you to begin the process if you haven’t already, and continue it if you have!

So, I told you that the writer of Luke wants us to know who Jesus is. How do I know that? Because, when you read it from start to end, you will be struck by how often his identity is questioned. The Pharisees, a strict sect of Jews, asked “who is this fellow...?” John the Baptist asked “Are you the one...?” After watching Jesus calm a storm, his disciples asked themselves “Who is this?” Herod asked “Who...is this I hear about?”

Then there comes a critical moment – a turning point in the gospel -where Jesus asks the question of his disciples.

"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" (9:20)

He wants to know if they know!

What they know, is the first thing about Jesus the writer of Luke wants us to know.

"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Peter answered, "The Christ of God." 9:20

Jesus is Savior

The writer of Luke wanted us to know Jesus was the Christ, which means, he was the promised Savior of God. Jesus was the one sent to save God’s people.

Let’s look at probably the most well-know line in the book of Luke:

**And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. ¹¹For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.
(Luke 2:10-11 KJV)**

The disciples knew who he was, the angels knew who he was. It is important to note, that so did the demons.

Moreover, demons came out of many people, shouting, You are the Son of God! But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew he was the Christ. (Luke 4:41 TNIV)

In that passage, the demons also know a second important thing the Gospel writer wanted to reveal about Jesus. The demons acknowledged **Jesus was the Son of God**. He is called that directly 6 times, and not just by demons, but also by angels and Satan himself. These are all spiritual beings with inside knowledge into the spiritual realm.

The story of the virgin birth emphasizes Jesus as son. When the angel came to Mary, he answered:

**The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."
(Luke 1:35 TNIV)**

Satan addresses Jesus as Son of God.

**The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread."
(Luke 4:3 TNIV)**

The "if" in this passage doesn't mean the devil is not sure. It is better translated "since you are the Son of God". There is no doubt what Satan believed.

God himself identifies Jesus:

**A voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him."
(Luke 9:35 TNIV)**

Jesus is the Son of God, sent by God for a purpose.

So we can see Jesus is Savior and Jesus is the Son of God, and then the writer wanted you to understand that **Jesus was King**. Not just a king, but THE KING. This becomes evident as you see reference after reference to Jesus being of the line of David, Israel's most beloved King, and the one to whom God promised he would put a descendant on the throne. The angel declared to Mary:

**The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."
(Luke 1:32-33 TNIV)**

Jesus would be the KING OF KINGS. His kingdom would never end.

Jesus is recorded in Luke as speaking at great length about the kingdom of God, and the authority he was given to reveal the kingdom and to reign in it. It is how he performed miracles, how he healed people, how he drove out demons. Jesus said:

But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. (Luke 11:20 TNIV)

He taught about life in the kingdom. His Kingdom. The King is the one who alone had access to the kingdom of God, and who could offer it to whomever he chose. Earlier I said that as Messiah, Jesus was sent to save God's people. As King, he was given the authority to define who was included in that group.

Looking at his disciples, he said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. (Luke 6:20 TNIV)

But Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. (Luke 18:16 TNIV)

He included the poor, the children, the sick, the sinners, the Gentiles. He included all women. He included Samaritans and any other nationality who wanted to be included. As you read, you will be amazed at who he included – all those who had been excluded from the Temple and Jewish community until now. As KING, he opened his arms very wide. Only THE KING, could do that!

But not only did the writer want us to see that Jesus was King, God's son and the Messiah, we are also to see that **Jesus is the Suffering Servant** spoken about by the prophet Isaiah. There are many references to Isaiah's prophecies in Luke, and you can see them all when you do your own reading and study. Isaiah said that a servant was coming.

"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations." (Isaiah 42:1 TNIV)

Isaiah 53 said that God would send a servant who will suffer at the hands of the people. be rejected and killed, then again see life, and in that process, would pay the price for the sins of God's people.

Then hundreds of years later, Jesus said about himself, as recorded in Luke:

And he said, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." (Luke 9:22 TNIV)

Jesus did exactly what Isaiah said the Servant of God would do.

The Writer of the Gospel of Luke meticulously paints a portrait of Jesus that shows him as the Messiah, the Son of God, the King and the Suffering Servant.

But the thing is, this isn't just nice or interesting to know – this is NEED-TO-KNOW stuff! This is life-and-death, need-to-know information. The writer of Luke wasn't sharing some neat stories he thought you would enjoy – because if Jesus is the Messiah, the King, the Son of God and the Suffering Servant, it means Jesus is the one God has sent to this world, to fulfill his mission on earth to redeem all of creation. God, the Creator of the Universe, the King of all kings, the God of all gods is at work in human history making all things new, and his plan was to send a Savior for our redemption – and Jesus was that Savior. There are no other options; there are no other plans for saving the world, and bringing it, which includes all of us, away from chaos, destruction and death. Because we NEED TO KNOW THAT, the Gospel of Luke spells it out quite clearly. The question we now need to ask, is, what are we (you, me, us, the rest of the world) going to do with this knowledge?

The Gospel demands a response

The Gospel of Luke is certainly an ancient biography. AND, it is also an announcement that demands a response.

There are many times through the Gospel of Luke that responses to Jesus' are recorded. There is another hint for your reading. But I want to look at one in specific today, and I think it could be the most important one, because it presents the choice, with its consequences, clearly and graphically. It will be familiar to many of you, but I hope that as we look at it in a new context, we can understand its implications in a new way.

Let me set the scene: Jesus has been arrested. His disciples have abandoned him. He has been tried (if you can call it that) by Pontius Pilot and Herod, and even though he was declared innocent by both of them, because of the pressure from the crowds, he is sentenced to be crucified. The cross is the destination of Luke's Gospel. It has been the focus of the second half of the book, as Jesus three times told his disciples he was going to Jerusalem to die:

Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled.

He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again." Luke 18:31-33

So after 22 chapters of carefully painting a picture of Jesus as Messiah, Son of God, King and Suffering Servant, we are brought to the moment of the cross. Let's read it – if you have your Bible with you, we are in Luke chapter 23.

Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals - one on his right, the other on his left.

Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One."

The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."

There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence?"

We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

(Luke 23:32-43 TNIV)

This account of the crucifixion is awesome. When we read this, we must ask ourselves 2 questions:

After all this, 1. **Who do I -- who do we believe Jesus is?**
And 2. **What do I -- what do we think the cross means?**

The Jewish leaders and the soldiers took turns mocking Jesus on the cross. Their sarcasm and cruelty, the casting lots for his clothes, and offering sour wine, clearly articulated who they believed Jesus to be – a powerless loser - not the Messiah, not a King, certainly not the Son of God.

Those who mocked, saw the cross as the defeat of Jesus. It was the end of the “reign” of this so-called “king of the Jews”. In their minds, there was no understanding why anyone who could save himself, wouldn't. Since he didn't.....he couldn't. In their minds.

Now we come to Jesus' final moments. His life is ebbing away, as he continues to struggle for breath, and the pain of pushing on his hands and feet wears him down. The exchange between them is the last recorded conversation Jesus has in Luke – this makes it very important. An ancient biographer with a specific purpose would very carefully choose the recorded last actions. If we had a camera zoom lens, we would focus into a small circle around Jesus, and what we see is Jesus, with a criminal hanging on each side. And this exchange, beautifully represents the decision we have to make:

On one side of Jesus, we have Criminal 1.

- a. Criminal 1 looks at the cross, and at Jesus hanging there as a criminal, and sees Jesus the same way the Jewish leaders and soldiers saw him - defeated and powerless. He would certainly have heard about Jesus, if not even heard him speak, maybe even perform a miracle. He certainly would have heard about the miracles. Yet because Jesus would not save himself from the cross, Criminal 1 understands that he cannot save himself. So he chooses to reject Jesus' claims and his offer of salvation because he

cannot put his faith in someone who “can’t even save themselves”. He doesn’t only reject Jesus, but goes even farther, and joins in the mocking.

On the other side of Jesus, we have Criminal 2.

He is our miracle story. He looks at Jesus and sees something totally different. So much so, that he takes it upon himself to defend Jesus from the insults, the accounts says he “rebukes” the first criminal. He then proceeds to confess his guilt, declare himself deserving of his punishment, and proclaim Jesus as innocent. And then he turns to Jesus and asks him to “remember me when you come into your kingdom”.

OK – think about this – Jesus is hanging there, with only 3 hours to live. He can hardly speak any more – he has been beaten, flogged and nailed to a cross. He is naked, bruised and bleeding, and this second criminal makes this astounding request. For Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom, this criminal has to believe that Jesus is King in this kingdom even though he is dying on a cross!! Do you see how incredible this is? He saw what no one else saw – not even his disciples. The cross was not the end – it was the way in which Jesus would enter his kingdom as King. He believed that Jesus could have saved himself, but didn’t. He believed that Jesus could still save him. The cross was Jesus’ choice. We can look back to the important statement Jesus makes after his disciples recognize him as the Christ.

And he said, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." (Luke 9:22)

The cross was always God’s Plan A. It was foretold and it was chosen by Jesus in obedience to the Father. It was the price of redemption for all of God’s creation, and Jesus willingly paid it. But he paid it, in the hope that we would respond by accepting it. Two criminals – both physically dying for their sins - two choices. This is mankind – we are physically dying from our sins. What will our choice be?

Conclusions:

It is the same choice God has always offered.

What to do with Jesus is the most important decision you will ever make. Knowing Jesus demands a response – will we accept him as King and Savior, or will we see him as a defeated loser. Those are pretty much our choices.

It is hard to do, but let’s try and consider where we find ourselves in this story. I have actually found myself in every one of the characters at one time or another.

First, there are the Roman soldiers. They mocked Jesus, ridiculed him as he died on the cross. They did this out of pure ignorance – and I don’t mean that cruelly – they just didn’t know. They defined strength and power as Roman culture did – with military might and physical domination. They were uninformed about the God of the Universe and His plans to bring salvation to all peoples of the world. Growing up and living in this world, in this century, it is totally possible that all you know about Jesus is bits and pieces you have gathered from Christmas celebrations and the odd excerpt from some book that makes the best sellers list.

The soldiers represent all the people in the world who simply don't know the truth about Jesus. If this is you, please accept the invitation to read the book of Luke. If you need a Bible, you can pick up a free copy at the information desk in the Lobby after the service today. In Luke, you will meet the real Jesus, who came to earth to fulfill God's mission. As followers of Jesus, we are called to spread the good news, the Gospel message, to the ends of the earth. As long as there are people who don't know, we have a mission! As followers of Jesus, we all need to be ready to share Jesus with the Roman soldiers in our lives – as we meet with family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and as we demonstrate the love of Christ in how we live.

The second group is the Jewish Leaders. We can be pretty hard on this group, because they should have recognized Jesus when he came. They knew the Scriptures, they knew the prophecies, however, these leaders had put God in a box, and believed they knew what God would do. They were so wrapped up in their religious traditions, with their set expectations of God's redemption, that they missed when God actually showed up and redeemed in a whole different way. They missed that God loves the WHOLE WORLD, not just the religious people. God is at work offering salvation to all people, from all nations – to all who want him. Sometimes, we can get caught up in our own Christian church work that we forget how BIG the scope of God's plan is. We must continue to keep our vision big and our eyes open to God doing something new, different and way beyond us! And then join in!

The third group is the disciples. They are notably absent at the cross. These are the ones who believed Jesus, and followed him when it was all good, but who bolted when times got tough. When the cost of following Jesus got a little too high. Does that sound familiar to anyone here besides me? Jesus said:

“And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:27)

While for most of us, the cross will not likely mean a physical crucifixion, there is no way to understand that “the cross” means something comfy and easy. We are meant to sacrifice of ourselves for the sake of Jesus. We are required to give of our time, our talents, our love, our care, our money. We are required to share, and to put other's needs ahead of our own on a regular basis.

It is easy to be Christian when going to church on Sunday is legal. When we can meet for Bible study during the week. When God is pouring out health and provision and friendship into our lives. But what about when it is really hard? When it could get you arrested, mocked, ridiculed? We will NOT be able to stand during these times unless we know who Jesus is, and unless we see the cross as the WAY in which Jesus paid for our salvation. Unless we see that collectively, our crosses will also be the WAY God brings redemption to the whole world.

It is so important to keep reminding ourselves of who Jesus is and what he offers, in both this life and the life to come. You can't fully follow him, if you don't know him well. And as you get to know him, you only want to know him more!! He promised his disciples, “I will be with you”. He promised the second criminal “You will be with me in paradise”. His very presence is the greatest blessing we could have. To reject that presence is the worst thing that could

happen to us – it brings destruction, despair and ultimately death. It is the difference between the fates of Criminals 1 and 2.

The blessings of following Jesus far outweigh the costs of discipleship. Once the disciples understood fully who Jesus was, and what the cross meant, they stopped fleeing. Read the book of Acts to see how courageously they carried their crosses. Instead of fleeing, they were martyred, many of them, for their faithful discipleship. When we find ourselves reluctant to follow Jesus with all our hearts, we need to spend more time getting to know him. Immersing ourselves in the Gospels to see how worthy he is of our love and devotion.

We talked about the Roman soldiers. We talked about the Jewish leaders. We talked about the disciples. Now let's look at the first criminal. The first criminal, despite what he had heard, and maybe even seen, was too skeptical to believe that Jesus was capable of saving him. We can easily look at the genocide in Rwanda, the earthquake in Haiti, the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, and feel that because God did not stop it, He is not capable of stopping it. If he does not save....he can not save. This is probably the toughest challenge for many people. And there is not a quick or easy answer to that challenge. God's plan was for Jesus to go THROUGH the experience of the cross to start the process of global redemption and salvation. He is not finished yet. Jesus told his disciples that they would also have to bear their own crosses, if they were to follow. We have been invited into the process. Therefore, we will continue to have troubles until God finally and fully completes his mission of restoration. We can't limit ourselves to a narrow view of Jesus, based on what we see here and now. While we wait, we need the broad view, the global view.... We need to see and know Jesus for who he is.

Which brings us to the second Criminal. He had the broad view. He saw Jesus as Savior and King. And because he knew who Jesus was, he was able to trust him for his salvation. He was able to see his own guilt, and confess that to Jesus, and then humble himself to ask to be saved. Does that describe us? Can it describe us? Can we see Jesus on the cross for what it really is? Will we trust him for our salvation, even today?

The cross was necessary. And it demands a response - to accept Jesus as Savior, and then to follow him as King.

I know I am not supposed to say this, or probably even think this, but sometimes I do. Sometimes I am sort of jealous of the repentant criminal on the cross. Not for the horrible death, for sure, but because he only had to only had to accept Jesus as Savior - he never actually had to follow him with his life. My very ungracious self thinks, "that's not fair – he never actually had to do anything good with his life, and he still got saved."

Yup. And that.... is amazing grace.

But then I also think – he never got to help anyone in the name of Jesus. He never experienced the satisfaction of being part of God's mission here on earth, and giving up a little of his life to give a whole lot of life to someone else. He never got to give a drink of water for Jesus' sake. He never got to pray for anyone, in the power of Jesus. He never got to sponsor a World Vision child, or visit with a lonely person. He never got to serve meals to

hungry people, or pack a Samaritan's Purse shoebox, or share Jesus with those in prison. He never built a medical clinic in Mali or Bolivia. He never got to teach in Kids Branch, or bake cookies for worship services. He never got to go with a sick person to be their advocate before a doctor, or with a wrongly evicted tenant to a landlord and demand just and fair treatment. He never packed a Xmas hamper, or never clothed or cared for a homeless person. He got to heaven, but he didn't get the unimaginable joy of hearing God the Father say, "well done, my good and faithful servant". Maybe, I am not so jealous after all.....

Closing

When we know God as King and Savior, we can trust him with our lives. We can accept the cross as God's plan for worldwide redemption. How well do we know God?

Elias and I have been married 16 years now. We were friends for 2 years before we started dating, then we dated for 2 years before we married. I was able to commit to loving Elias because I felt I knew him well. I had seen him live, up close, through all 4 seasons twice! I had heard stories about him from his parents and his good friends. Not to suggest that he never surprises me – just last Sunday I learned that as a child, he went to the movie theatre with his grandfather 9 Sundays in a row to see Mary Poppins!! But I am able to continue to commit to loving and partnering with him because I know him. I can trust him with my life.

God wants the same for his relationship with each of us. He wants us to know him well enough to choose to love and follow him. So much so, that he put on human flesh, and came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ, and inspired the Gospel writers to capture these important portraits, so that you and I, today, can know him and then choose him.

Who we understand Jesus is, and how we see the cross, determines the choice we make. It is the most important decision we will ever make, and it has consequences for the way we live our lives. Like the repentant criminal, we can recognize Jesus as Savior and King, and then we must go further, and follow the King in his kingdom. Our cross may often be difficult to bear, however if we keep our eyes fixed firmly on Jesus, the blessings far outweigh the costs of discipleship.

Let's pray....

Father, thank you for wanting us to know you. Thank you that while we were still sinners, you died on a cross for us. Thank you for inspiring the Gospel writers to reveal more of you to us. Help us Father – fill us with the desire to know you more, the discipline to seek you with all of our hearts, and the courage to follow you fully. Be with each person here who takes up the challenge to read the Gospel of Luke. Guide us with your Spirit to see you with fresh eyes. And help us to choose you, today, and every day of our lives. In Jesus name. Amen.

Blessing

I am most serious about reading Luke! It is homework time! On your way out, the ushers will hand you a study guide to help you as you read. Carve out 2 hours and find a quiet place where you will not be interrupted. Turn off your cell phone. And go meet with Jesus. See what the Gospel writer was inspired by God to share with you.

If you would like to respond to God today, either for the first time, or to ask for help in your ongoing life, I will be up here after the service, and there are wonderful people back in the prayer room – any of us would be happy to help you to do that. Or you can do that privately in prayer with God.

May I leave you with this blessing:

May you learn to know Jesus more and more each day, so that when Jesus asks “Who do you say I am?”, you are able to answer, “My King and my Savior”. May you choose Jesus today and every day.