

Pat Conover: From Faithfulness to Pentecost

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I bring you a different approach to the Easter sermon today. The story of what happens at the tomb is just one paragraph in Luke's long story that begins when Jesus starts for Jerusalem and ends with the lively presence of the Holy Spirit in the midst of community at Pentecost. Think about it. Pentecost celebrates the presence of the Holy Spirit, the immediate experienced Christ. The faithfulness of Jesus to his call, at all costs, sets up the story that runs to the cross. The recognition by the disciples that the cross was not the end sets up the story of Pentecost. This story begins in Chapter 18 and ends after the second chapter of Acts, Luke's sequel to his gospel. For Christians who are focused on life after death as the payoff for faithfulness, Easter is the culminating event. This sermon is about the way Luke tells the story – as an important event on the journey from faithfulness to Pentecost.

Luke was writing for Christians for whom the death of Jesus and the response of the disciples to his experienced presence was already very old news. His story is addressed to their needs and concerns, which are, if you think about it, not so different from our needs and concerns. The resurrection chapter is about new awareness and new acceptance that leads to new openness, openness to the dangers his listeners faced and openness to the joys and responsibilities of a community

that dares to take up discipleship.

If my retelling does not sound right to you in some way, I beg you to read the whole story for yourself in one sitting and to urge you to attend to what Luke is focusing on. This is not hard because Luke is not subtle. He makes his purpose in the story clear at the beginning, repeats it along the way and summarizes it at the end.

First, two preparatory remarks.

Luke's story, like Matthew's, builds on the account in Mark. There is a lot of agreement between the three stories and the three gospels all end up in the same place, with instructions for the disciples of Jesus as to what to do next. The difference is that Luke also writes a sequel. All three versions aim at helping the faithful deal with the shameful death of Jesus by saying that the death of Jesus was necessary to fulfill the predictions in Hebrew Scripture. Alternately stated, all three stories proclaim Jesus as the Messiah that the Jews were looking for. There are some interesting differences in detail between the three stories, but Matthew and Luke have followed Mark in the basic structure and purpose of these stories.

Luke was speaking to an audience of the late first century, possibly early second century. By this time, early Christianity had already undergone a huge shift. There was no longer a center in Jerusalem gathered around James the brother of Jesus and around Peter. The genocide of Jerusalem in 66 c. e. was vicious. So many people were crucified that one witness

says that they ran out of crosses and as many as five had to be nailed to the same cross. This ended the dreams of a military revolution against Roman authority. This ended the focus of Judaism on the temple. So begins the ascendancy of the Pharisees who carried the seeds of modern Judaism, and who gave to Christianity the model of sharing the scripture in synagogues as the heart of corporate worship, replacing sacrifice as the heart of corporate worship.

Luke was writing for the numerous small centers of Christianity that had spread out from Jerusalem with the primary leadership of Peter and James, the brother of Jesus. In contrast, after the story of the resurrection, Matthew quickly returns the focus to Galilee where Jesus grew up and spent most of his ministry.

These small centers of early Christianity, just beginning to know the name of what they were creating, were facing numerous theological and spiritual crises. This story of the end of the life of Jesus and how the disciples responded to it is intended to hold the emerging Christian faith together in the face of these spiritual and theological shocks.

In addition to the shameful death of Jesus and the genocide of Jerusalem there was also the problem that predictions of the end of the world had not come true within the first generation of the contemporaries of Jesus, as promised. Those listening to Luke's story might still be looking for an apocalyptic ending in the tradition of Paul, of Hebrews, and of the book of Revelation, but it was clear that they had to attend to life in the meantime, a time context we share. Not surprisingly, given this context, Mark and Luke provide a minimalist version of eschatology and see Jesus as the

fulfillment of Jewish scripture and Jewish longing. Eschatology is changing from an apocalyptic end of the world to personal life after death when things will be made right. *Matthew goes in for more ornamentation that is apocalyptic but ends up in the same place as Mark and Luke.*

Here is Luke's story.

It begins with Jesus saying to disciples, "We are going to Jerusalem so that everything written by the prophets will be fulfilled." The gospel ends at exactly the same point with the resurrected Jesus telling his disciples, "Everything in the law, the prophets, and the Psalms had to be fulfilled." Luke is putting context around the death of Jesus to share the meaning that has come to him and other gospel writers. Following the God of Jesus at all costs, sharing the saving truth at all costs, gives meaning and purpose to life. If you will also follow the God of Jesus, if you will live by the saving truth at all costs, then you will be saved. Such faithfulness of the disciples is modeled in the story of the appearance of Jesus on the road to Emmaus. After recognizing Jesus, the followers take that same road in the other direction, back to Jerusalem, back to the center of Roman and Temple power where Jesus was betrayed and killed, back into danger in order to participate in the regathering that became the first center of Christianity.

For some of the listeners to Luke's story, the message was about being saved for heaven after death when things would be made right. However it was heard, the living reality was that the followers of Jesus were joined together in a company of believers. They found in their common life a lived truth that

was saving in at least three ways. They had a name and place and were no longer deeply alone. As in Seekers, those who make the deep commitment and deep connection are deeply cherished by those who have eyes to see. Furthermore, they had a story that provides landmarks for finding one's way in the world, even a world that is filled with horrible things, like being fed to the lions for the sport of spectators. Most importantly, they learned that their life counts in terms of the eternal truths that we can touch but cannot grasp.

For Luke, it all starts with the forgiveness of sins. This beginning point is hardly surprising for a Jew who was focused on keeping the law and focused on sacrifice to appease God when we fail to keep the law. At the very end of the Gospel story, the resurrected Jesus says to his disciples "You are to proclaim that repentance of sins in the name of Jesus brings forgiveness."

This is hardly a surprise message. Luke repeats it repeatedly throughout the gospel. For Luke, it was this message that led to the death of Jesus. It is this message that helps us sort out the other major players and why they did what they did in this story. Follow along with me.

In Jesus day, the center of Judaism was in Jerusalem where the third temple was a dazzling achievement of Jewish ascendancy within the Roman Empire. One part, Solomon's portico, was then the biggest building in the world. The construction of the temple was ongoing and it required the labor of tens of thousand of workers, working for decades. It was a big deal, bigger than Disneyland or the Super Bowl. All Jews were supposed to pay a temple tax every year and to come to Jerusalem to sacrifice in the temple. Even more of the money

for the temple came from a deal between Herod and the Romans. He had bought his kingship and his high priests had bought their positions. Nevertheless, they got a big thing back from Rome for the price they paid. Taxes were crushing and a lot of the money went to Rome. However, a lot of the money also went to the temple and it provided employment rather than starvation for those tens of thousands of workers. It also bought them religious independence and a big part in everyday civic authority, though subject to the final say of Rome. This deal reflected the standard colonial strategy of Rome, religious tolerance and rule through puppets in exchange for heavy taxation. This deal led to crushing poverty for the masses but it gave them the comfortable distraction of a magnificent temple and a feeling of respect as a recognized people and ally of the dominant power in the world.

Leadership in the temple was divided and there was some vicious infighting among the various leaders. However, the factions were united in promoting the importance of the temple and the centrality of temple practice as the heart of Judaism. They were in control but their control was tenuous. They existed at the pleasure of the Romans. They were widely seen for what they were; they were puppets who aided and abetted the oppression of the people. In the story of the Samaritan who aided a Jew, it was no surprise that the priest and the Levite walked by on the other side of the road.

The role of the Pharisees in this story in Luke's story is interesting. They had pulled away from the Jerusalem cult by creating synagogues that focused on the sharing of Hebrew scripture, but they had not turned their back on Jerusalem. In this story, they warn Jesus and are not part of the enemy team.

The Jesus team is a second-generation reformulation and regathering of part of the John the Baptist team, plus others. John preached repentance of sins and forgiveness through being baptized. This was a radical challenge to the centrality of the temple cult and temple leaders. The temple leaders hated the Samaritans because they did their sacrificing in hill shrines away from Jerusalem. This makes the stories about the relationship between Jesus and the Samaritans very interesting and I hope you can read those stories in that light. Jesus tells us that forgiveness of sins depends on repentance rather than sacrifice. This makes him as confrontational to temple authority as John the Baptist and the Samaritans, more confrontational than the Pharisees who were still trying to have it both ways.

The enemies of Jesus were the temple leaders. Luke is unequivocal on this point. Let us be clear about ending the anti-Jewish understanding that calls Jews "Christ killers." Luke repeats repeatedly that the common Jews loved Jesus. They were his disciples. They were the throngs that came to hear him preach, who admired his miracles. They are the ones who kept the temple leaders from acting against Jesus in the temple after he had assaulted the traders, after he had challenged the temple leaders with dramatic stories that accused them of hypocrisy and oppression. They were the ones who honored his entrance in Jerusalem, who laid their cloaks in his path as a sign of honor. Jesus was too popular with the everyday Jews to be captured while in the temple. It might spark an uprising. Therefore, they captured him by night and he was tried out of sight of the people. The everyday Jews are the ones who traveled with him to his death on the cross and lamented his mistreatment. Moreover, of course the first Christians were Jews who carried and interpreted his story to other Jews and then to the Gentiles. If anyone should tremble

about the parallels to the enemies of Jesus, it should be religious leaders, especially Christian leaders, who prop up political leaders that oppress the people.

Luke treats the Roman leadership, in the person of Pilate, curiously. Pilate is presented as someone who did not have animosity to Jesus but goes along with the temple leaders who are crying for his life. Luke gives the same treatment to Herod Antipas, the Jewish puppet leader in Galilee for the Romans. When Pilate discovers that Jesus is a Galilean he remands the case from his authority to Herod Antipas who happens to be in Jerusalem. Herod Antipas is presented as being eager to meet Jesus and as hoping he will see one of the miracles of Jesus. However, the interview does not go well and Herod Antipas sends Jesus back to Pilate who then agrees to the death of Jesus. This part of the story may have been tactical on Luke's part. The Romans were feeding Christians to the lions and he would not have wanted to inflame further Roman oppression.

The circumstances of Jesus and Luke were very different with regard to the Roman Empire. In the time of Jesus, Jews were not being persecuted and the temple was thriving. The emperor Tiberius was in retirement on the island of Capri. After the death of Jesus, the line of emperors went bad and several brutal and essentially crazy emperors, first Caligula and later Nero, ruined whatever there was of positive themes in the Roman Empire and hastened its end. Nevertheless, Rome took a long time in dying and Luke was appropriately afraid.

Luke's story is consistent from beginning to end. His Christmas story is equally revolutionary and names Herod as oppressor – child killer. Mary's Magnificat is a bold

presentation of reform or revolution. Jesus is presented as the Son of David, the carrier of the political hopes of the Jews, and as an alternative authority in Judaism to the temple leaders. After the Last Supper, Jesus changes his instructions for the itinerant ministry of the disciples, telling them to keep their purse and their pack, to sell their extra cloak and buy a sword. Luke says that two of the disciples already had swords, which with Judas Iscariot, means that at least three of his disciples were Zealots or Zealot sympathizers.

The Jesus of Luke is first a key spiritual figure, who points the way to salvation through the forgiveness of sins without the distraction of temple sacrifice. Luke's Jesus is the Messiah, and the Messiah figure in Jewish hopes was all about the ending of everyday oppression. In this story of the end of the life of Jesus and the response of his disciples, the theme of Jesus as king shows up repeatedly.

In Chapter 18, Luke tells the parable of a nobleman who would be king, a parable seldom discussed in churches. It is somewhat like the parable of the investment of talents, except that when the nobleman is leaving to be appointed king and the people left behind send a delegation to oppose the appointment. However, he is appointed king and comes back to collect on his investments and punish those who opposed his kingship. "Bring those who opposed my kingship before me and slaughter them in my presence."

This is probably best read as an attack on Herod as a puppet king. However, if you read it as a parable of the realm of God, then the Messiah is a political warrior king. Either way, it is a very political, very violent, story of opposition,

like the story of Herod as a child killer as part of the Christmas story.

When Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a previously unriden colt, Luke has the disciples sing, "Blessed is he who comes as king in the name of the Lord."

When he is jeered, mocked and beaten, Luke has the Romans display the mocking sign, "King of the Jews," a great storyteller's touch of having the oppressor declare the larger truth.

However, in telling the story of Jesus as King, Luke has turned kingship on its head. Luke's story is, "The greatest among you shall be your servant." Jesus is King, worthy to be head of the emerging Christian band, because he has acted faithfully, at all costs, to reveal the reality that saving truth cannot be killed. To claim that truth, to live by that truth, is to honor Jesus as savior, as king. It is to join the Christian band. It is to be released from the powers of sin to live into the present realm of God, guided by love and service rather than by self-interest, or by the defense of privilege, or by the oppression of others.

Jesus was not special because of spectacular suffering, as Mel Gibson's movie would have it. Tens of thousands died on the cross. Indeed, it was the commonness and the shame of the cross that are keys to its meaning, not a call to spectacular suffering.

Jesus was not special because he was oppressed and mistreated. His mentor, John the Baptist, was beheaded, and Luke makes it very clear that Jesus knew what to expect when he headed to Jerusalem. That is part of the power of this story. He did what needed to be done, at all costs, to make the living truth of love all the more transparent.

The disciples were able to make the marvelous transformation into becoming Christians, despite their confusion, despite the difficulties they had in communicating about Jesus, because they understood how Jesus, despite his shameful death, despite their dashed hopes, had fed their innermost hungers.

This story can feed your innermost hunger as well. However, if you hide and deny your hunger you will not be fed. If you do not know the salvation you need, you can only hang around in hope.

Your barrier may not be feelings of guilt, as it was for Luke. Jesus offers many other saving words. Are you distracted by your wealth or your hunger for wealth, by your power or your hunger for power, by your prestige or your hunger for a revered name, by the comfort of memorized answers rather than engaged questions, by the desire for thanks from those you serve, by appearances and sex, by the comforts of propriety and tact rather than vulnerability, by the roles of race and gender or by false patriotism and pride in the United States of America? The gospel, as Luke writes it, has clear guidance. Focus on love and justice and live into the truth you know, the relationships of solidarity and appreciation that do feed your deepest hungers, the trust that turns vulnerability into a path of grace.

Salvation. You have the everyday lived answers, answers that have proved sufficient for others in even the most terrible of circumstances, answer that end the fear of death – *an answer that is really about overcoming the fear of never having really lived.*

Salvation. You have companions that appreciate you as you are and walk along with you as you grow into meaningful living and shared community.

Salvation. You have companions who value you because you are precious, precious because you have taken up your part of the work of truth and love. When you have all these things and deeply appreciate them, you do not need speculation about the end of the world or heaven to be at home with God. This is salvation right now, to appreciate the life you have been given, to overcome your disappointments, to overcome the resentment of the injustices you have suffered, to forgive the hurts you have received, so they no longer hurt you.

Luke's story does not pretty up Jesus. Luke does not rescue Jesus from suffering because he is magically God and he does not make him the Savior because of the magnificence of his suffering. Jesus claimed his gifts of preaching and healing, and drew close to God in prayer. He gave what he had to give and celebrated what there was to celebrate. It is just enough story by which to live a life.

Come be with us in Jerusalem. Christ is risen!

