

Kingdom Living

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus challenges us to reach out to the poor, vulnerable and disenfranchised in our society

BRIAN ARMSTRONG, CORPS OFFICER, WINNIPEG EAST COMMUNITY CHURCH, MANITOBA
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The angel Gabriel tells Mary that she has been chosen to bear the Son of God: "You will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High"

Over the last six years, I have been challenged with the task of communicating "Kingdom living" principles to students at William and Catherine Booth College in Winnipeg. After several years of academic study and practical ministry, I felt confident that I had learned some things along the way that would be helpful to pass on the next generation of Christian leaders. In fact, I felt very much like Luke who, "after carefully investigating everything," wanted to present an orderly account so that students might know the truth concerning the things of their faith in Jesus Christ.

When I read Luke's Gospel I hear him saying, "I've got it! I've put it together and it makes sense. Listen to this good news: First, the Kingdom of God has come. Second, God is continuing to establish this Kingdom. And, third, God invites us to participate in the establishment of this Kingdom."

Authority Bestowed

For Luke, the birth narratives of both John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth are proclamations that these events have been initiated by God and that those involved need not be afraid. First, consider the story of John: "Then there appeared to [Zechariah] an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah ... Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son and you will name him John'" (1:11-13). Even John's ministry task is assigned by God: "He will turn many of the people of Israel to the

Lord their God" (1:16).

Now consider the annunciation of Jesus. At God's initiative, the angel Gabriel tells Mary that she has been chosen to bear the Son of God. He reassures her, "Do not be afraid ... You will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his Kingdom there will be no end" (1:31-33).

The naming of John and Jesus has significance. Under normal circumstances the naming of children is left to the human father. But these are not normal circumstances. The Kingdom of God is being established and God himself is taking the initiative of naming the children. Luke records that Zechariah is silenced until he writes the name "John," the name God had chosen (see 1:63-64). In the same way, Mary and Joseph follow the angel's directive: "After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb" (2:21).

We would do injustice to Luke's writing if we missed the significance of the naming ceremony. In the creation story, Adam was given the task of naming the animals: "So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name" (Genesis 2:19). Humankind was given dominion over the animals (Genesis 1:26-28), and the Bible makes a deliberate connection between naming and authority.

Another example is recorded in Exodus, where we read about Moses' fear in approaching his fellow Israelites to tell them that he is going to be their representative to Pharaoh. To be able to name God would give him authority. In effect God says to Moses, "You are going

under my authority, just tell them ‘I AM WHO I AM’ sent you” (see Exodus 3:11-14). So it is with the naming of John and Jesus. The naming is a proclamation that these children belong to God. Their births are God’s initiative.

Proclaiming Good News

The good news is that the Kingdom of God has come in the person of Jesus Christ. This is made clear in his first public sermon in Luke: “When [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’ ” (Luke 4:16-21). It’s as if Jesus looked around and said, “I’m here to tell you some good news. The Kingdom of God has come.”

According to Luke, Jesus was sent to reveal the good news of the Kingdom of God (4:43). Throughout Luke’s Gospel we are provided with miraculous evidence to validate Jesus’ proclamation that the Kingdom of God has come. If you want proof that a new day has arrived, observe how Jesus makes the lame walk, the blind see, the dead return to life and the sick well again. He talks to unclean spirits and they obey him. He speaks to the elements of nature and they do as he commands. The child born by the Holy Spirit of God to a virgin in Bethlehem is establishing his Kingdom.

Least, Last and Lost

In Chapter 9, Jesus sends out his disciples with the particular task of proclaiming the Kingdom of God (9:2). And as we follow Luke’s Gospel through to the death and resurrection of Christ, we are confronted with numerous teachings about our role as believers in the ongoing establishment of God’s Kingdom.

When I think about the impact of Luke’s Gospel on my own life and ministry, I am confronted again and again with the fact that I worship and serve the Holy One of Israel, that he is continuing to establish his never-ending Kingdom and that he is taking an enormous risk

by inviting me to be part of this great adventure.

My role is put into perspective by listening in on the discussions of the disciples and the responses of Jesus. In Luke 9:46, “An argument arose among [the disciples] as to which one of them was the greatest.” But Jesus proclaimed that “the greatest among you must become ... like the one who serves” (22:26-27). That has become the motivation of my ministry. For 13 chapters Luke unpacks this theme, primarily through parables. These stories depict people who have no rights in society—the ostracized, the defenceless, those in need of an advocate. They refer to the excluded, the poor, the sick and the lost (sheep, coin or son), widows, children, the uninvited, the blind and the outcast.

Go and Do Likewise

According to Luke, the greatest in the Kingdom of God is one who looks after the disenfranchised of our society—the weak who have no voice and no rights. Our task is to care for the least, the last and the lost. If you want to be great in the Kingdom of God, you’ve got to be a servant of all. Jesus said, “I am among you as one who serves” (22:27). If we have ears to hear, the same message is given in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The despised Samaritan does a good thing by tending to the needs of a hurting individual. But Jesus doesn’t say, “Go be a Samaritan.” He says, “Go and do likewise” (10:37).

Luke’s gospel presents us with the good news that the Kingdom of God has come in the person of Jesus Christ. He is continuing to establish his Kingdom and invites us to join with him. The author begins by stating his intentions to write an orderly account so that the truth might be understood. He ends with Jesus opening the minds of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus: “The he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised ...’ ” (24:44-49).

Now go and do likewise.

All Scripture quotations from NRSV