

Homily for Proper 9, Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
preached at St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Albuquerque
July 3, 2022
by the Rev. Neil Elliott

“I saw Satan fall from heaven like lightning.” A remarkable saying, all the more remarkable because it appears only in Luke's Gospel.

I

I grew up in a small revivalist church in Gallup, just a couple of hours down the road. It was the kind of church where *questions* about the Bible were quickly run to ground.

I remember my grade-school Sunday School teacher telling us, again and again, that having different Gospel accounts was like having people standing on the four corners of an intersection when two cars crashed. We'd have four different perspectives—and that would give a fuller picture of what happened.

It took a few years before I started to doubt that analogy; to realize that any traffic cops taking accounts as dramatically different, even contradictory as our Gospels would probably call in the detectives. They would open an investigation. People would be taken downtown; there would be some hard questions.

I'm older now. I know I would not be at home in a church like the one I grew up in. I am much more at home at St. Mark's; and, frankly, I'm very comfortable in the world of scholarship, where people look at the Gospels and ask hard questions with their morning coffee.

- None of these writers claims to have seen what happened, why do we call them “witnesses”?¹ At best, they relied on sources, oral or written—what

¹ The closest we get is John 21:24—which identifies the eyewitness in the third person.

were they? They apparently modified the material. How? Why? There's a world of scholarship pursuing those questions.²

- There's a world of scholarship insisting, detective-like, that we stay focused on the larger question, What really happened?³
- And there's a world of scholarship asking, What are the writers' motives? What are they trying to do with the story each of them tells?⁴

As a child I got the impression that asking questions like those was spiritually dangerous. But the eleventh-century theologian Anselm spoke of "faith seeking understanding." I now think the more we question, the more we explore, the fuller, the more anchored our understanding will be. Our faith will be more complicated—more complex, richer, realer.

II

I want to spend a few minutes today with the last question: what is Luke up to as he tells his very distinctive story? Luke is a literary writer; he probably didn't intend his work to be read in little chunks over a year of Sundays, as we do. (We'll make the best of it.) I want to see how today's reading fits into the larger sweep of Luke's story.

We listen this morning for Luke's very distinctive voice *as Christians*, who want to know, what does this say to us as we seek to live out our calling in a complex and challenging world today?

² Scholars have long conjectured that the Gospels depended on decades of "oral tradition." Paul uses precise language in 1 Cor. 11:23 when he says he "received" and "handed on" traditions about the Lord's Supper—well before there were any written Gospels. The great majority (85%?) of New Testament scholars also hold that Mark was the first Gospel written (using oral tradition) and that Matthew and Luke both knew and used Mark as a base for their own Gospels, along with a no-longer-extant source of the sayings of Jesus ("Q"). The other 15% hold to alternative solutions to the "Synoptic Problem," explaining the substantial overlaps among Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

³ This question usually focuses on "quests" for "the historical Jesus," with discussions concerning the kinds of criteria for establishing probability that are familiar enough from crime procedurals on TV: Do we have multiple independent witnesses? What are their self-interests and what do they admit *against* their self-interest? Etc.

⁴ This scholarship began with reading the Gospel writers as "editors" of their sources (so, "redaction criticism"), then shifted toward regarding them as *authors* of coherent stories ("literary" or "narrative criticism")—the stuff of college English lit courses.

II

A few “big picture” observations.

First, other Gospels tell the story of Jesus. *Luke tells a story about the people Israel.* He begins with the people gathered in Jerusalem, in the Temple, calling out in prayer to God to deliver them (Luke 1–2). That’s the way the Book of Exodus begins, and Luke probably wants his readers to hear bells going off.

God answers—with a barrage of angels who suddenly appear, in the Temple and out in the countryside, and ordinary faithful men and women suddenly caught up in the Spirit to prophesy, all announcing that God is acting now, the Messiah is about to arrive. *For Luke*, that means that God’s ancient promises to Israel and to the nations are about to be fulfilled.

These are two fast-moving chapters made up of luscious poetry, now set to some of our most gorgeous church music. All these poems in different mouths show tight message control; they introduce the plot of the Gospel.⁵

The poetry echoes the Psalms and the Prophets. Luke is ringing more bells. *This is a continuation of Israel’s story in scripture.*

Second, *Jesus belongs to this people.* Luke shows his parents bringing the eight-day-old Jesus to the Temple for his bris. Luke shows Jesus slipping away from his parents to go to his own bar mitzvah—discussing Torah with the scholars when he’s twelve. Luke shows the adult Jesus as a faithful member of his home synagogue, in Nazareth, being handed the portion from the Prophets.

Jesus says Isaiah is talking about him. *He* is anointed “to bring the good news to the afflicted. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord”—the language of the Jubilee year, when debts are cancelled and the land returned to the people.

Only Luke gives Jesus so *earthly* an agenda. This is Messiah as “social justice warrior.” Luke doesn’t *have* to do this. But he immediately launches Jesus into just this action. “Let the oppressed go free”? Jesus immediately goes

⁵ The Song of Zechariah, the *Nunc Dimittis*, the *Ave Maria*, the *Magnificat*, the *Gloria in excelsis Deo*—also central pieces in Episcopal daily prayer. —In the wake of the Shoah, some German scholars still found it inconceivable that such “Jewish” material might have an integral role in a *Christian* Gospel (so Conzelmann, *Commentary on Luke*: this was a “Jewish source” added onto the Gospel). We now recognize the clear role these chapters play as Prologue.

about healing people, casting out demons. Luke describes him as “setting people free.”

Third, Luke’s plot centers on Jerusalem, the spiritual capital of the people. We begin there; and as we heard last week, there comes a day when Jesus “sets his face to go to Jerusalem.” Matthew gives us Jesus sitting on hillsides with throngs gathered around him for chapters-long sermons. Luke gives us Jesus “on the go,” a third of the Gospel organized as a long road trip *to Jerusalem*.

There is a sense here of Jesus launching a campaign on the city. I think of the moment in the movie *Gandhi* where Gandhi decides to lead a march to the sea and make his own salt, breaking the British monopoly. A journalist asks what he is up to, and Gandhi says, “Generals are not the only ones who know how to organize campaigns.”

Jesus’ campaign began last week with the kind of “mustering” scene we know from Westerns and war movies. “This is going to be hard; I need only volunteers dedicated to this mission. If you’re not ready, step back”—and some do.

This week he launches the campaign—again, *only in Luke*—by sending out seventy (where did *they* come from?) as shock troops, to “soften up” the resistance—Satan’s hold on the land. In Mark, the twelve have trouble casting out a single demon; in Luke, the seventy march through villages healing and casting out demons with spectacular success.⁶ They are victorious—Jesus sees Satan fall from heaven like lightning.

But he warns them, Han Solo-like, “don’t get cocky.”

It’s a theme Luke will sound again and again: *There will be victories. There will be setbacks*. In the words of the Civil Rights slogan: *Keep your eyes on the prize*.

⁶ Mark 9:14-29.

III

That theme governs what happens in Jerusalem, the goal of the whole Gospel. Jesus enters the city with a great crowd that has followed him on the road.⁷

The other Gospels describe the people of the city turning in hate against Jesus—and so inviting God’s judgment on themselves and their city. Only Luke finds sympathetic characters, the women of Jerusalem who weep for Jesus. He sympathizes with them; he has wept over the city.⁸ Only in Luke does Jesus give a clear and explicit public warning: the city will be surrounded by Roman armies; the people should be prepared to flee to save their lives.⁹

But Luke isn’t done with Jerusalem. After his crucifixion and burial, the *risen* Jesus appears over and over again to followers—not in Galilee, as in the other Gospels, but in and around Jerusalem.¹⁰ Only in Luke do the disciples remind Jesus—and the reader—of this Gospel’s agenda: “we thought Jesus was the one to deliver Israel.”¹¹ Only in Luke does Jesus tell them: Stay in the city until you are given power.

That is as clear a signal of a sequel as you’ll see in any Marvel movie.

⁷ Luke 19:37-38, the “whole group” of disciples praises God “for all the miracles they had seen” and cry out, hailing Jesus as the one who comes “as King.” The sudden *disappearance* of the sympathetic crowd and their replacement by a hostile block, “the people of Jerusalem,” in the other Gospels is a literary and historical puzzle; I’ve addressed it in “Jesus, the Temple, and the Crowd: A Way Less Traveled,” chap. 2 in Robert Myles, ed., *Class Struggle in the New Testament* (2019).

⁸ Luke 19:41-44.

⁹ Luke 21:20-24. In Matthew and Mark, this warning is given privately, as a secret revelation to only a few of Jesus’ disciples, and couched in mysterious language about the “desolating sacrilege.” In Luke, Jesus speaks clearly and publicly (as he has done “daily” in the Temple precincts, 19:47) through chaps. 20 and 21.

Greek and Roman readers might have heard more bells, recognizing the role of the prophet cursed to be disbelieved, like Cassandra, the prophet of besieged Troy—prophesying the city’s doom but ignored by most of its citizens; Aeschylus and Virgil’s *Aeneid*.

According to later Christian tradition (Eusebius; Epiphanius), some of Jesus’ followers were warned by prophecy to flee Jerusalem as the Romans approached, and found their way across the Jordan River to Pella (the “Pella tradition”); some scholars wonder whether this is a confused reflection of Jesus’ words in the Gospels. introductory discussion: “Flight to Pella,” Wikipedia.org.

¹⁰ In Mark, a “young man” tells the women who come to Jesus’ tomb that he will see his disciples “in Galilee,” but the earliest manuscripts of the Gospel include no such appearances.

¹¹ One disciple on the road to Emmaus, Luke 24:21. Jesus chides him for having lost his faith.

IV

Only Luke knows that this story *requires* a sequel, the Book of Acts. We have trouble seeing that—our Bibles break the two volumes apart, and our lectionary ignores most of Acts.

Here, again, *Jerusalem and the people* are central. Acts begins by reminding us of the plot—one of the disciples rather impertinently asks Jesus, “is it *now* that you restore the kingdom of Israel?”¹²

Any Jew would have recognized this as the Messiah’s job description: restore Israel’s freedom. Make the nations obedient to Israel’s God.

I want to pose that *literary* fact as Luke’s *theological* challenge to us: why does Jesus *need* the book of Acts to be the Messiah?

Luke, I suggest, wants to describe the messianic age as an *earthly* reality.

He needs a people gathered *in Jerusalem*, empowered by the Holy Spirit with the gift to speak the languages of the nations,¹³ led by the Messiah himself through his authorized lieutenants, the apostles.

Luke needs that gathered people to realize the vision of the Messianic kingdom by sharing their resources so that no one goes hungry—what scholars call the “apostolic communism” that Luke describes twice, so we don’t miss the point.¹⁴

Even that isn’t enough to give Luke the restoration of Israel and the gathering of the nations; and we already know Jerusalem is doomed to destruction.

So Luke gives us—waves of catastrophe: the Sanhedrin arrests apostles, Herod puts an apostle to death; there is wave after wave of persecution leading to some apostles being driven out of the city. They move on, and bring the message of the Messiah as they go.

Again: *there will be victories, there will be setbacks: keep your eyes on the prize.*

Only Luke knows that the messianic opera ain’t over until the bald apostle sings. He needs that unlikeliest of heroes, Paul, for his Gospel to be complete.

¹² Acts 1:6.

¹³ The Pentecost story, Acts 2:5-12.

¹⁴ Acts 2:44-47; Acts 4:32. Note that our Baptismal Covenant asks us to continue the practice of the earliest assembly, being “faithful in the teaching of the apostles, the breaking of bread, and the prayers.”

After he is dramatically turned from persecutor to apostle, Paul is led by words from the heavenly Christ; he is sent out from the doomed city; he travels from place to place, having dramatic encounters with allies and enemies; he is beset by storms and shipwrecks; at last he comes to Rome.

That seems anticlimactic; Acts ends with Paul sitting around for two years as a prisoner, talking to Jews and Gentiles about the Messiah. Is something missing?

A contemporary Roman reader would have been struck to the heart. Everyone knew this story. Led by words from the heavenly Venus, Aeneas escaped the doomed city of Troy, traveled from place to place, had dramatic encounters with allies and enemies; he was beset by storms and shipwrecks; at last he came to the shores of Italy—where he established the city of Rome. Through his piety he became a spiritual ancestor of the Roman people, who would spread throughout the world to rule the nations.

When Virgil first recited the *Aeneid* to the Augustus, the emperor wept to hear it.

Luke wants to bring his readers to tears. Through Paul, the storm-swept prisoner, a new people is being formed, made of Israel restored and nations made obedient, and *they* will spread through the earth. But it is *their* Messiah, not the Emperor, who “rises to rule the earth.”¹⁵

The challenge Luke poses to us, I think, is just there; are *we* participants in that new people?¹⁶ Are we living out an earthly anticipation of the messianic age, when justice and peace are the rule, and no one goes hungry? It’s a daunting question, but I think Luke provides encouragement: *There will be victories; there will be setbacks. Keep your eyes on the prize.*

¹⁵ The last line is from Romans 15. On Luke-Acts as (in part) an imitation of the *Aeneid* see Marianne Bonz, *The Past as Legacy: Luke-Acts and Ancient Epic* (2000); Dennis MacDonald, *Luke and the Politics of Homeric Imitation: Luke-Acts as Rival to the Aeneid* (2019).

¹⁶ Contemporary scholarship—and (perhaps with less focus) the statements of various churches, including our own—caution against imagining that *the Church* is “now” “*the* people of God,” in any way that replaces or supersedes *Israel* as God’s covenanted people. Luke strives to keep in balance the restoration of *Israel* and the bringing-under-obedience of *the nations*. Scholars debate how successful he is—but a more pressing question is whether *Christians* today manage to respect the integrity of Israel and Judaism as God’s people.