

THE ORDERLY ACCOUNT
Sermon for Pentecost 2-Lk 7: 1-10
LPC, 6/2/13

Several years ago I decided to write down all the stories that have been kicking around our family ever since I can remember. In no small way are these stories my family's Holy Scripture. If Holy Scripture is writing that gives a group of people identity and values, these stories give my family identity and values. I wanted my children to have some kind of orderly account of these definitive family legends.

So I started to write: of when my siblings and I broke our parents' bed by jumping on it when my grandmother was babysitting, and she didn't even bat an eye; Or when my grandfather broke a strike to save the mine ponies; Or about how when Rich and I unwittingly managed to insult each other's natal state in our first words to each other; Or how Ben's first word was "Weem," whatever that means; Or when Toby sustained at least fifty simultaneous wasp stings.

I made some headway, but haven't worked on this anthology for years. Writing an orderly account of anything spanning lifetimes is hard. But that is what the evangelist Luke explicitly sets out to do in his Gospel.

We will be reading from the Gospel of Luke throughout the long Pentecost season ahead, so I thought it might be useful to present a short introduction to this most approachable gospel.

Luke begins in chapter one by saying

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

You can check this out in the Bible or New Testament in your pew. It's on page 901 of the big brown Bibles and paraphrased in "Today's English Version" (the little green book) on page 54. It's unknown whether Theophilus was a real person. The name means "God-friend," so it's possible Luke is addressing his book to friends of God in general.

Luke was probably a gentile (not previously a Jew), writing to gentiles. Scholars infer this because Luke's knowledge of Judaic details and of Palestinian geography is sketchy.

Luke also wrote the Book of Acts, which addresses Theophilus again and refers to "the first book." Presumably the Gospel of Luke is the first book, and the Book of Acts

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the second book, in a two-part history of the church. The Gospel of Luke, in its orderly way, tells the story up to Jesus' Ascension; Acts picks the story up there and tells of the church's growth through the end of Paul's life.

For his sources in writing his orderly account, Luke used the Gospel of Mark, along with a source that Matthew also shared, plus a source unique to Luke. The "eyewitnesses" to whom Luke refers, presumably figured among these.

Speaking of the other Gospels, it may be useful at this point to talk about how Luke compares with them. Here's a whirlwind tour, which would probably make my New Testament professors at Seminary wince.

Mark was probably written first. Mark is very direct and plain. His favorite word is "immediately."

Matthew was probably a Jew before he was a Christian. Matthew is very familiar with Jewish practice, and methodically alternates passages of Jesus teaching with Jesus acting, establishing his authority. There are five major blocks of teaching in Matthew, probably deliberately paralleling the five books of Jewish law. Matthew was probably writing for a congregation that was partly Jewish and partly gentile.

Luke was a gentile writing for gentiles. In his Gospel he shows Jesus interacting with gentiles and outliers of all sorts. His Book of Acts, with its saga of the spread of Christ's word to gentiles throughout the known world, flows logically from his Gospel account.

John was a mystic. John includes the most poetic and visionary language, and emphasizes Jesus' preexistent divinity and sonship to God. In John, Jesus doesn't perform "miracles," but "signs." It's not a miracle for God to heal or feed 5,000 people; these are signs of Jesus' divinity.

Thus, to simplify grossly, one could say that Mark was concerned to tell what happened. Matthew was concerned to tell what happened in the context of what had gone before. Luke was concerned to tell what happened in the context of what came after, and John was concerned to tell what happened in the context of eternity.

In today's reading from Luke, Jesus heals the slave of a Roman soldier without even laying eyes on him, never mind hands. Here is an example of the typical Lucan theme of faith in Jesus arising from an unlikely source: of Jesus reaching beyond the expected confines of Jesus' own circle. This is a wonderful story, made more poignant for me because the centurion behaves with a combination of humility and integrity that I've found typical of faith-filled military people even today.

In the weeks to come, listen, O friends of God, to this orderly account, so that you too may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.