Most Excellent Theophilus
Luke 1:1-4

A Sermon Delivered
By
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Holy Father may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in Your sight O Lord our Strength and Redeemer, Amen.

I thought it might be interesting to begin the sermon this morning by giving you all a pop-quiz in ancient history. Now I have to admit, I never really liked pop-quizzes in school, so it’s not really fair that I’m doing this to you. And my guess is, you probably didn’t like getting quizzes either. Midshipmen, this is the last thing you wanted to get in Chapel…right? In the interest of full disclosure, part of this is a dry-run. I’m teaching a class in Luce Hall this year, so I thought I probably ought to practice my skills at giving unannounced quizzes. And who better to practice on than the congregation who loves you and will forgive you. I’m going to ask three questions, and with each question, the level of difficulty will increase. The last question will be relevant to our sermon this morning. Are you ready (Ancient History 101):

1. (Pretty easy) What great empire was in power in the Mediterranean World at the time of Jesus’ birth?
   Rome.

2. (A little more difficult) – In what modern-day country did Emperor Hadrian build his famous wall?
   England.

3. (Most difficult) – What color was Emperor Hadrian’s horse? Just kidding. What happened one-thousand six hundred and three years ago yesterday? (For you non-math majors, that would’ve been August 24th, 410 AD). Rome fell. I grade on a curve so you all pass!

August 24th, 410 AD, Rome, the eternal city and the heart of an empire that reached into three continents and ruled for nearly a millennia, was sacked by Alaric and the Visigoths from the North. It was a brutal and traumatic event. It’s hard to overstate the psychological impact that this had on the known world. Rome was invincible, unassailable, or at least supposed to be. The plot thickens even more when you realize that just 26 years before this event (384 AD) Emperor, Theodosius the 1st, had abolished paganism and established Christianity as the official religion of the empire. Constantine did pave the way for this by his conversion 70 years earlier, but Theodosius made it official. And so because of this, when Rome fell in August of 410, there arose a very strong undercurrent among the people, especially the intellectuals, that Christianity was to blame.
They began to reason it must’ve been the Christian faith that caused this catastrophe. “After all, [the argument went] the Roman gods honored courage and the warrior spirit and fealty to Rome above all; but these Christians, come to think of it, brought concepts like meekness and humility to the empire. And of course to be meek and servant-hearted is to show weakness and invite enemies.” *One interesting side note to all of this is that the one place that Alaric and the Visigoths did not touch when they sacked Rome was the Christian churches. Alaric was a Christian himself, and ordered that no Christian church was to be touched, and no one inside to be harmed. Despite this, the claim that the Christian faith was somehow responsible for the fall of Rome was spreading; and Christians were not sure how to answer this claim.

One man who was looking for answers was a certain Roman official in North Africa and a sincere believer. His name was Marcellinus. And daily he was being assailed by the arguments of his fellow officials who were deriding and challenging the Christian faith. Now Marcellinus was a capable man. He had to have been; he was smart and well-spoken, but he wanted help. He wanted to understand more clearly what he believed and why. So being an earnest seeker and showing great initiative, he decided to write a letter to one of the local bishops. The bishop’s name was Augustine; and yes this is the same Augustine that we know from church history as one of the fathers of our faith. Augustine immediately wrote him back, the first line of his letter reading, “…O Marcellinus, most beloved son, due to you by my promise, I have undertaken to defend [the kingdom of God] against those who favor their own gods above her founder.”

Soon there followed a correspondence between the two; and eventually Augustine’s letters began to circulate and were read by people all over the empire. So powerful and sweeping was Augustine’s explanation of the Christian faith and the difference between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of man that his letters were eventually arranged into a book that would go on to be one of the most influential works in the history of the West…this is the 4th question in your quiz today. Can anyone tell me the name of that book? *The City of God.* And all of this because an earnest believer, Marcellinus, struggling to understand his faith, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, sought to know more fully the truth about the things of God. History has lauded Augustine, and rightly so, but we’ve overlooked the man who started the whole thing.

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In the very first words of our Gospel reading this morning, we meet another earnest believer, also forgotten on the pages of history, who likewise sought to know more fully the truth of the things of God. In Luke chapter 1 verse 3 Luke says:
“...it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; 4 so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.”

This morning begins a sermon series on the Gospel of Luke. If you had a chance to read Chaplain Gore’s e-letter, you saw that beginning today, and going all the way to the beginning of Advent, your chaplains will be offering a series of sermons from Luke, called “Journeying with Jesus.” If we’re going to step out on this journey together and understand this Gospel, we need to understand the purpose and occasion behind it. Luke’s purpose is clear: to set out in detail, a full and orderly account of all the events of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Luke wanted the world to know about the most important events in the life of the most important Man who ever lived, and who still lives. The occasion, however, was the inquiry of this earnest believer named Theophilus.

Now we don’t know a great deal about Theophilus; he’s only mentioned twice in all the Bible; and both times as the recipient of Luke’s writings – here in the Gospel of Luke, and then again in the opening of the Book of Acts. We do know that his name means “loved by God or friend of God.” And we know that he was someone of great importance or responsibility. Luke calls him not just “Theophilus,” but “Most excellent Theophilus.” Keep that in mind. “Most excellent,” was a title reserved for men of high standing or government office. When scholars look at documents from the ancient world in this time period, the name “Excellent Theophilus” surfaces several times, one of which was a Roman prefect or governor who would have ruled many. Others believe this Theophilus to have been a Roman lawyer who stood at Paul’s defense at his trial in Rome. Some scholars think he was one of the Jewish high priests in Jerusalem who would have held incredible authority among the Jews. Still others hold that he was perhaps one of Luke’s former patients. We know that Luke was a physician, and in ancient times, physicians (doctors) were often slaves. Thus Luke could be writing to his former master to explain more fully about the faith they’d undoubtedly discussed in many conversations together. Whoever he was, it was because of him that Luke penned what has been called the loveliest book ever written.

I’ve never heard a sermon preached on Theophilus; but if we read between the lines, he has something very powerful to say to us. For all his power and authority, rank and privilege, Theophilus sought the Lord in his life. He longed to know God’s truth. He hungered and thirsted for the things of God about which he’d been taught. And as such, he puts a question to all of us - Are you seeking God in your life? Are you really seeking Him? Jeremiah 29:13 says that “If you seek me, you shall find me, if you seek me with all of your heart?” Proverbs 2 says, “if you cry for discernment, lift your voice for understanding; if you seek her as silver and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will discern the fear of the LORD and discover the knowledge of
God.” Does this describe us? Do we long to be taught, to learn more fully about what God has for us in His will and his word? Do we hunger and thirst for righteousness? Do we ask, seek, and knock? Do we make our ears attentive to wisdom, lift our voices for discernment, and cry for wisdom as for hidden treasure? Are we a Theophilus?

As long as I live I will never forget Fire Controlman 3rd Class Jeffrey Bayle. He worked in the Combat Information Center of the USS SAN JACINTO, the ship to which I was chaplain several years ago. FC3 Bayle had gone through some difficult times in his life; like many of us, he’d made some bad decisions, grew up in and out of church, and had gotten into some real trouble on deployment. Thankfully, he saw the light as it were, began making better decisions and more importantly renewed his faith in Jesus Christ. He began coming to services that we held in our ship’s library and you could just watch him growing in his faith. His whole division saw it. We had arranged to meet once or twice a week and read through some of the stories from the Gospels. My practice was to let the Sailors read the story, make a few points, ask a few questions, and then pray together asking God to apply the truth to our hearts.

Well on this particular day we had just read the story of the woman with the flow of blood from Luke 8. You know the story…As Jesus walked on one day, the crowds followed and pressed in all around him. A woman who’d been hemorrhaging blood for 12 years with no relief, saw him coming; and she thought to herself, “if only I can touch the hem of his garment I will be healed.” We’re told she moved through the crowd and just as Jesus passed, reached out and touched fringe of his cloak. Immediately Jesus stopped and said, “Who touched me?” Well the disciples were a bit put off and answered as if to say, “You’re surrounded by people on all sides, pressing in on you, and you asked “who touched me? Everyone’s touching you Jesus.” But Jesus said, “No! Someone did touch me, for I felt power go out of me.” At this Jesus turned around and saw the dear woman trembling. She told him all that she had gone through and done. And Jesus said to her, “Daughter your faith has made you well, go in peace.”

Petty Officer Bayle talked about the story for a few minutes and I shared some thoughts. I shared about the woman’s courage to move though that crowd like she did; her willingness to reach out to Jesus; the healing that she experienced, not only physically, but emotionally and spiritually as well. Then I asked him what he thought the story meant. I’ll never forget his answer. Without blinking he said, “That’s easy Chaplain. It’s about two kinds of Christians in the world. Those like the crowd who casually bump into Jesus from time to time, and those like that woman, who reach out to Jesus in desperate faith. Only those experience real healing.” I’ve never read that story the same since.

That’s really the issue that confronts us today. Are we just going through the motions in our Christian lives…just being carried along with the crowd? Or are we reaching out and seeking the Lord in our lives? And
it’s an important question to ask, because it can be very easy (especially in a place like this) to identify with Jesus; to get caught up in the crowd that’s surrounding Jesus; to get excited by all the energy and enthusiasm related to Jesus…but when all is said and done, we find that we’ve really just been bumping into Jesus along the way, carried along with a changing crowd who may not be there on another day.

One factor that I think keeps us from seeking God is that we may not realize how desperate we really are; how bad it really is. I don’t recommend small children watching this movie, but there’s a great scene in the movie, *Jaws*, when Roy Scheider, who plays Police Chief Brody, is chumming the water looking for the shark. All of the sudden the great beast rears its ugly head and Brody, who’s only a few feet away realizes the enormity of the monster that they’re trying to catch. He runs up to the pilot house where Captain Quint is and do you remember what he says? It’s a great line. “You’re gonna need a bigger boat.” He realized that things were much worse than they thought.

This is true in the spiritual life as well. And I want to be careful because it’s a paradox. On the one hand, things are always better than we think because God never changes and His love never fails, and there’s no distance that He cannot cross to reach us no matter what we’ve done. He can save us to the uttermost. And yet on the other hand, in some sense, things are also worse than we know…sin is real and it’s crouching at the door, and keeps us impoverished in ways we may not be aware. Remember what was said of Sampson when we awoke after having his hair cut in his sleep. “And Sampson awoke not knowing that his strength had left him.” The Apostle John puts his finger on this very condition in Revelation 3: “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.”

It can be easy, too easy to be this way - to think that we have no needs. We’ve got our I-phones, our Facebook friends…whatever it is, but we forget how desperate we really are. It’s not always the bad things and vices that quench faith. More often than not, it’s the good things that crowd out our lives, and make us forget our spiritual poverty and our need before the Lord. And our culture lavishes “good things” upon us.

Theophilus had good things in his life. He had power and status, he had stuff…but behind all of this, he had a heart that sought the Lord. And his name will never be forgotten. Were he here today I think he’d have a lot to say to us. I think he’d say:

1. Charisma, rank, and power can only take you so far, but they cannot redeem your sin.
2. Stuff can bring you momentary thrills but it cannot nourish your souls.
3. The military can put a shiny uniform on you, but only Jesus can clothe us in righteousness. In fact I think he’d be the first to sing that great hymn:

What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. O precious is that flow that makes me white as snow, no other fount I know, nothing but the blood of Jesus.

4. Finally, I think Theophilus would love our Commandant’s two-word motto of what he expects from the Brigade and all of us…Midshipmen, this is the last question of your quiz. What is the Commandant’s motto? Be excellent!

That motto was made for Theophilus. You see what made Theophilus excellent, “most excellent,” wasn’t his power or title or rank. What made him excellent is that he sought the Lord in his life. He remembered that great promise which God offers to each one of us, that “if you seek Him, we shall find Him, if we seek Him with all of our hearts?” Let’s be excellent this new Academic year; let’s be excellent and we journey this semester through the Gospels; let’s be excellent in all that we do. Let’s be excellent, like Theophilus, and seek the Lord with all of our hearts! For He alone is worthy.

They that have ears to hear let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the church, Amen.