

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel for the Feast of St. Luke the Evangelist on the Twenty First Sunday after Pentecost, October 17, 2010 at The Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

To proclaim the acceptable Year of the Lord

Today, all around the world, Christian churches are observing this Sunday as ST. LUKE'S DAY. In great urban cathedrals of marble and in tiny hand-built mountain chapels people are, right this very minute, recognizing in word and song the personal and literary contribution of the Apostle Luke, the "beloved physician," the friend and biographer of Jesus. It seems to me that this October is an especially significant and appropriate time for us to be celebrating a person whose life-witness and preaching message was so clearly focused on the work of HEALING.

It seems that everything about this world of ours is in danger of spinning out of control. There probably have been few times in human history when world events have been as confusing, frustrating, and painful. We human beings seem to be completely caught up in a whirling vortex of political corruption, financial scandal, and international terrorism. I've actually reached the point where I hate to pick up the morning newspaper because it's so full of depressing accounts and graphic photos documenting worldwide hunger, disease, violence, hatred, and division. If ever this world needed a physician, someone to offer some practical, positive advice about healing and health—personal, social, political, economic, racial, and religious health—it's right now. And...St. Luke might just be the perfect person for us to turn to because he knew a thing or two about just how diseased and deadly human malignancy can get if things are simply left unattended.

According to the Apostle Luke, today's world is no doubt a bit more sophisticated and complicated but it's actually pretty similar to the world of the first Century about which he was writing in what we now think of as The New Testament. St. Luke's message for his world could just as easily be a message written for reading today in 2010. His book starts out describing what a mess the world was in—political and religious infighting that involved every conceivable kind of corruption and dishonesty. No one trusts anyone; the property of the poor being foreclosed and stolen, politicians promising anything and then taking advantage of the law to persecute their enemies. In short, it was a world in chaos and despair—a world where there seemed no chance for healing or hope of any kind. But, here's the amazing thing, St. Luke tells us that there's a tiny glimmer of light in the midst of all that darkness. It's a light at the heart of an obscure folktale that's somehow being kept alive like a campfire spark deep in the wet wood which weary travelers are blowing into the tiniest flicker of flame. The story is all about an historically obscure religious family—people with oddly old-fashioned names like Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. It's a completely improbably story about how the world is about to be turned completely upside down—not by the rich and famous, not by the wise and talented, not by the powerful and respected, not even by the curative powers of the emerging scientists of that day. Luke the Physician is offering a completely different diagnosis: Luke the trained healer—not some simple-minded and pietistic rustic—looks not to medicines concocted by herbalists but to the life-restoring balm of God's own love. He looks at a very sick patient and determines that the world is about to be utterly transformed by nothing short of a **miracle**.

Luke the Physician has written it all out for us. He describes just another day in the nowhere dusty little crossroads town called Nazareth. Down at the local synagogue, it's a typical Sabbath observance. A young unknown Rabbi is today's guest preacher. He is handed the well-worn scroll of the Book of Isaiah and, from it, he reads these familiar words—words that are understood only to be poetic and metaphorical; not anything to be taken literally:

“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 acceptable year of the lord.” As the preacher sat down to continue speaking about this ancient text, he completely amazed his listeners as he assured them, **“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”**

We can only imagine how many sleepy-eyed listeners that morning were suddenly jolted wide awake by what they were hearing. They were being told that all of the hopelessness, futility, and depression that they had gotten used to over the years was suddenly OVER WITH! They were hearing the incredible, shocking news that this whole screwed-up world which they had resigned themselves to was about to stop being sick and start getting well. They were learning that the Doctor was making house-calls! They were discovering that the same God who created all things was writing a new prescription—a powerful antibiotic that would end every human ill. They were being confronted with the fantastic truth that this incredibly fouled-up planet of ours is precisely the area in which God's presence, pardon, and power were about to be revealed. Today's the day! It's here-and-now! The healing process has begun. Everything that's sick will be made well!

I suppose like most groups of human beings there were those in that room with Jesus who wrote all that kind of prophetic imagery off as ridiculous scriptural nonsense. Some probably assumed that it was just another slick approach leading up to the annual Stewardship drive. Still others, however, took it seriously and their lives were changed immediately and permanently. It's this third group that was **healed**—this group that found a new way to be alive.

Any Doctor will tell you that there's a major difference between healing and curing. Medical science can “cure”—it can set broken bones so that they function more or less properly. It can kill off infections so that healthy tissue can recover. It can treat a wound so that the life-forces flow once more and weakened but operative regeneration starts taking place. Curing is what Doctors do. But Doctors can't HEAL because that is a process of **complete restoration** in which everything is “made whole”, without any defects or remembered pain. Healing is God's gift alone and it can only happen as and when God decides.

As I thought this week about the story with which the Physician Luke begins his Gospel narrative, I am really struck by the realization that the promise God is making is that COMPLETE HEALING is beginning here-and-now, right in the midst of all that is wrong and all that is ill. How does that work? How can wholeness and health transform that which is diseased and distressed? I know that it can't come through more laws, or higher taxes, or greater government programs. It can only happen as God's love surrounds, embraces, and transforms the partial with the whole, the imperfect with the perfect, the faulty with the complete. That's why on this Day of St. Luke the Physician and Healer I want to wind up my remarks with a story that I heard years ago from John Claypool, who was the Rector of St. Luke's Church in Birmingham. It's a story that tells me, once more, the truth originally declared by Jesus himself: “This day you have heard this scripture fulfilled within your own hearing.”

The story is that there was a family in Texas who had three wonderful healthy children. Everyone was excited when a fourth child, it was announced, would soon be born. The whole family went to the hospital the night the child was due to arrive. They waited expectantly for the news. The Doctor came to the waiting room and told the father, "You have a wonderful new daughter". He told the other children, "You have a new sister to love and care for." But then, the physician said, "For reasons I cannot explain this child is perfect in every way except one. She was born without any arms or legs. It is a genetic abnormality I can't account for." Of course, the family was completely silent and stunned. They had no idea how a severely disabled child could have been born into their perfect family. They had no idea what it would mean to raise and care for such a child. But they were the sort of people who thought more about what they could do for the child than they worried about why this had happened to them.

So the family went to work and began to give to this child every opportunity they could possibly conceive. The little girl grew into a magnificent person, a positive, happy engaging individual with a brilliant mind, artistically sensitive. Still, in all her 21 years of life she was never able to do for herself those things most of us take for granted every day. She could never move herself, bathe, or feed herself.

About a year before she died, her brother brought home his roommate from college for a holiday visit. This young man watched closely for three days the kind of life that this young woman had to live because of her tragic disability. When he was getting ready to leave, he couldn't help asking her, "How have you managed to live like this? How do you hold in all your anger at God who didn't prevent this from happening? Why are you not constantly in rage and anger against the injustice of it all?" The young woman looked at him steadily in silence for a moment and then said, "I realize how much I have compared with what most people in the world have. What I have may not seem like much to you but, listen, I have been able to see, thanks to my family, so many beautiful things. I have been able to hear the most incredible music. I have been able to taste, to touch, to smell, and to feel. What you see only as deficits, I see as GIFTS. To me, everything in my life is so much greater than if I had never existed at all. I wouldn't have missed being born for anything at all."

Now that's real HEALING—not just a temporary cure—not just a motorized wheelchair, maybe a prosthetic limb, a medication to relieve the pain. Through her family's love, that young woman had entered life **fully healed** because the one great secret of life had been revealed to her: that life itself is a wonderful miracle and NOTHING can separate us from the God whose gift life is. The **sheer wonder of having life outweighs completely whatever problems and challenges that life may entail.**

The story of life is difficult and challenging. No one is without problems, issues, concerns, and setbacks. Disappointment is a part of every human history. Times are tough—way back then and right now this morning—but the important message of it all is that God is with us—right in the middle of it all—willing and working to help and to heal if we will open ourselves to that power. God wants to fill very instant of your being to overflowing with the richness and perfection of living. God wants to transform the ordinary into the completely extraordinary. That kind of healing grace is available to you. That kind of healing grace is a gift just waiting for you to untie and unwrap it. It's yours just for the taking. Instead of complaining about all that's wrong and all that's bad, God wants this year a special time for you that stands out above all others. **THIS is the acceptable year of the Lord.**