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theme: Luke's Beginning (Luke 1:1-4)

materials: Bibles, news story

welcome

What are your main sources of information about the world? What news broadcast do you watch, which newspaper do you read, which websites do you go to for info? Why do you go to these sources? Do you feel you are informed about the world? How do you gauge if something that you read or hear is reliable or not?

Bring in a news item about your neighbourhood, city, country or world that you can discuss with the cell. Where do you see God in this story? Ask other members of cell to bring in stories to discuss in subsequent weeks.

worship

Read Luke 18:35-43 together. The prayer: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" has become a well-used devotional prayer throughout the history of Christianity. Ask each person around the circle to repeat this prayer, and then repeat it to yourselves silently for some time, reflecting on what it means to beg for Jesus' mercy, what his response was to the blind beggar, and what his response is to you. Is there any area where you need healing or freedom? Share this, and pray for one another. Then pray for others you know who have not received Jesus as Lord, and cry out for mercy on their behalf.

word

Read Luke 1:1-4, twice through.

There are four Gospel accounts, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, which tell the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Are they all the same? Why do we need four?

What do you know about Luke?

Why did he write this preface (verses 1-4)? What is the point of it?

Based on this opening, what do you think Luke intended by writing the story of Jesus?

Who do you think was Luke's intended audience?

According to this passage, who were the sources for Luke's information about Jesus?

What does it mean for these eyewitness sources to be "servants" or "ministers" of the Word?

Why do you read the Bible, the gospels in particular? What do you hope to learn or gain from reading them?

Luke claims to have researched the claims about Jesus closely and diligently. How closely and diligently have you researched the claims about Jesus? Do you think you really know who Jesus was and what he did, and that your information is from reliable sources?

Which sources do you trust for your information about Jesus, and why?

If someone wants to know about Jesus, what do you tell them? Where do you direct them to for reliable information, and how do you help them to understand it?



witness

Find one other person to begin reading through the entire books of Luke and Acts with. If the other person is a fellow believer, read them through in a public place, like a café (not yelling it out or anything, just reading it to one another). Make a regular time to come in and read together, and more likely than not someone will eventually ask you what you are reading and why.

If the other person is not a fellow-believer, perhaps choose a less public place to read, but again set regular times, daily if possible, to get together and read the Gospel. You don't have to read it all at once. Read two to three chapters at a time, and then meet another day to read some more.

action points

Write down as much as you think you know about Jesus and the story of his birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection, without checking Scripture. Give as many details as you can, and make it as chronological as you can. Keep this record and gauge it against what you learn about Jesus' life through the Gospel of Luke, and through the other Gospels as you read them.

The Salvation Army sponsors children around the world who are living in circumstances of poverty and oppression. Any offerings given at cell meetings go towards covering the costs of these sponsorships. Please challenge your cell to bring loose offerings each week, and bring a container to collect any such offerings that are given.

leader's guide

The Gospel according to Luke, probably written sometime between AD 60 and AD 80, is a careful, orderly account of the life of Jesus. Attributed to Luke, described elsewhere as the "beloved physician" and a companion of Paul's on his missionary journeys, this Gospel is part one of a two part story, the second part being the Acts of the Apostles. Part one, the Gospel, contains the narrative of the life of Jesus, especially in the light of his salvation. One of the most famous Jesus sayings from this Gospel sums this up: "For the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost." (Luke 19:10) Part two, the book of Acts, describes the spread of this gospel news and salvation through the followers of Jesus into the ends of the earth.

Luke's Gospel is written immediately for believers who have already heard the basics of the story of Jesus, but who are removed by some time and distance from the actual events of Jesus' birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection. This Gospel, then, is meant to be a reliable, documented historical account of the story of Jesus for the strengthening of the faith of believers. But it is also composed to be used evangelistically, so that its message might be spread beyond the limits of the Church, and so that all who read it might see it as a story that makes sense, that is worthy of belief. This book is intended to both train believers in the knowledge of Jesus, and to persuade non-believers to receive Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

Luke's Gospel account begins differently than the other three Gospels. John, for instance, opens his Gospel with the words "In the beginning", a clear and conscious connection to the book of Genesis. Matthew opens his account with the phrase "The book of the generation..." which is another allusion to Genesis (see Gen 2:4, 5:1,



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10:1, 25:12,19). Even Mark begins with the words “The beginning...”. Luke differs from these other gospels in that he is not, right at the start, obviously connecting his account of Jesus with the ancient story of Judaism. He does make this connection in the body of his gospel, to be sure, but he is making another connection right at the beginning. His opening preface, in which he gives his reasons for writing the Gospel (which no other gospel writer does at the start), has much in common with other serious Hellenistic (ie, influenced by Greek culture) works of the time. Luke is making a case that the story of Jesus he is telling must not be simply contained within the Jewish world, or even within the Church world. This story is part of serious world history, founded on trustworthy eye-witness evidence that has been researched with utmost care and attention. These eye-witness sources are the apostles (not just the 12 disciples, but also others who knew Jesus and were well-acquainted with his story), and they are called “servants of the word” to indicate that their testimony does not serve their own agenda or interests, but rather serves the Word of God alone. In other words, Luke is convinced that these sources were dedicated to Jesus and his gospel, and were speaking the truth as they knew it.

It is important to note that each of the gospels, while containing much of the same material (Matthew, Mark and Luke in particular) and are concerned the same primary subject – Jesus’ life, teaching, ministry, death and resurrection – also have different emphases, include unique material or different takes on the same stories, are “born” out of different Christian communities, and are even initially written to different audiences. Luke, for instance, seems to be writing for an urban, educated audience, given his concern for establishing his credentials and sources. The Gospel is addressed as a letter to Theophilus, about whom we know next to nothing, but who is presumed to be a man with some authority and prestige, perhaps even Luke’s literary patron. This account though, was clearly not designed to stay in Theophilus’ hands, but to circulate widely, so that the tradition handed down to Luke could be handed on to others. It seems clear that Luke based much of his work on the information found in the Gospel according to Mark, but again Luke makes some different points with the stories, and also includes material not found in Mark. There were collections of sayings and stories about Jesus that existed at the time (from eye witnesses), and Luke probably used some of these as sources for his work.

While Luke is a good historian, he is also a theologian. That is, he is not simply reporting what happened, but is also attempting to explain the significance of it, and why it matters to his audience. Some of the theological themes present in Luke centre around Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy: the ancient promises of salvation and Kingdom blessing have been realised in Jesus. The healings, miracles and teachings of Jesus are therefore all part of his gospel proclamation, and are seen in the light of Jesus being God’s promised redeemer and deliverer. Luke makes a special point of highlighting Jesus’ salvation for the poor and the outcast, especially those despised by official Judaism. Luke’s gospel displays the wideness of God’s mercy, and a response to this mercy will result in receiving the blessings of the Kingdom of God. Jesus’ message is first and foremost to Israel, calling the people of God back to their covenant, and then expanding the boundaries of what it meant to be the one true people of God. This message of Jesus is shown in Luke to have been embraced by commoners, but largely rejected by the rulers and those in authority. For those who did accept his message, living as followers of Jesus meant denying the self, engaging in whole-hearted discipleship, waiting faithfully for the return of Christ, and rejecting the temptations of the wealth of this world.

(I.H.Marshall’s *Commentary on Luke* and N.T. Wright’s *The New Testament and the People of God* were the main sources used for this Leader’s Guide)