
A Meditation for the Feast of St. Luke

**An Evensong meditation by the Rev. Julia Mitchener
The Feast of St. Luke**

My grandfather had a habit of repeating himself, a habit of saying the same things over and over and over again. My mother claimed this was because he was a doctor and frequently worked with patients who wouldn't listen to instructions and had no intention of complying with their treatment plans. My grandfather operated off the premise that if he repeated his directions often enough, then, maybe, just maybe, some of these folks might one day be inspired to exercise, eat right, and take their medication. The fact that this didn't always prove true did not dissuade him; far from it, his enthusiasm for reminding people about what they were supposed to do carried over into virtually every arena of his life. Each meal I ate with my grandfather followed the same basic pattern. About halfway through the main course, he would peer down the table to see how much milk I had left in my glass. Then he would make a comment or two about the importance of dairy in the diets of growing children. These gentle admonitions would continue intermittently until, as the dishes were cleared and dessert brought out, he would launch into a full-throated diatribe on the virtues of calcium: *Drink your milk so you won't break your bones! Finish your milk so your teeth don't rot! Milk'll make you strong and fast. It'll help you think better. It'll make your skin glow! And it goes great with cookies!* He would repeat some variation of this mantra again and again and again until, finally, worn down, I drained my glass in self defense.

Today is the eve of the Feast of St. Luke the Evangelist, author not only of the gospel that bears his name but also of the Acts of the Apostles. Many believe that Luke was a doctor, though we can't be sure of this. One thing we do know is that Luke was someone who repeated himself. Like my grandfather, he had certain messages he sought to drive home again and again and again, in the hope that people would hear them and heed them. Wanting to emphasize that the salvation of God was not just some pie in the sky dream for the afterlife but something being realized even in the here and now, Luke used the word "today" twelve times in his gospel (By comparison, the other three gospel writers collectively used it only nine times). Luke loved to share stories about the Good News taking root among unlikely people—women, children, foreigners, lepers, tax collectors and other outcasts. He reported honestly about the consequences of doing ministry with such a motley crew—getting chased to the edge of a cliff, being betrayed, persecuted, even put to death.

It seems especially appropriate this year, in this second autumn of the coronavirus pandemic, that we remember Luke's faithfulness—his dogged determination—in working to get his message across, even, and especially, in the midst of challenging circumstances. Luke has long been called the patron saint of doctors. Doctors, you've no doubt noticed, have been under attack lately—doctors and nurses and so many other medical professionals have been under attack for their work in conveying a message that some have not wanted to hear. The very people who are giving their all to save lives in the midst of a global pandemic have been maligned, sometimes even physically threatened, for their efforts to help and heal.

In case some of you participating in this service today are doctors or nurses, technicians, therapists, or other practitioners of the healing arts, let me pause for a moment to say this: We—all of us—owe you a debt of gratitude that we can never repay. Your courage, caring, self-sacrifice, perseverance, wisdom and skill, your integrity in treating patients to the very best of your ability even in the midst of great resistance—all of this has been nothing short of heroic. Well done, good and faithful servants. On this eve of the Feast of St. Luke, may you draw comfort and strength knowing that you walk in the footsteps of one who also experienced frustration and disappointment and persecution while never giving up trying to help people along the path to healing and wholeness. May you know how intentionally you are prayed for in this faith community and in so many others around the globe. And may you take heart. May you take heart in this extraordinarily challenging time. Your life is a beautiful offering, a beacon of light and hope in this dark and despairing world.

And now a word for the rest of us: Our lives can be beautiful offerings, too. Our lives can be beacons of light and hope in this dark and despairing world. There is light and hope here in this place today. There is light and hope in this service of Choral Evensong, as the faithful gather to tell “the old, old story,” to sing and to say, over and over and over, the ancient words of promise given to us in Christ Jesus.

*The Almighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his Name.
He has mercy on those who fear him
in every generation.
He has shown the strength of his arm,
and has scattered the proud in their conceit.
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,
and has lifted up the lowly.*

Here is the essence of the message that the Church, like St. Luke, proclaims again and again and again, in both good times and bad. Words of healing and love, words of redemption and release. To many, their repetition week in and week out, may seem an exercise in futility. We live in a world, after all, that is so often filled with the very opposite of redemption and healing and release. And yet the witness of the Church is that these things—redemption and healing and release—are still happening and that they will continue to happen. Against all odds, good news will be brought to the poor—today! The blind will receive their sight—today! People who have stumbled into this building on what they were sure were their very last legs will somehow gain strength not just to trudge one more mile but to blaze a path forward on a journey more wondrous and life giving than they could ever have imagined. I know this, because I have seen it happen. I have heard stories about it, too.

You know, I can’t tell you the number of messages we have received here at the cathedral from people across this country and, yes, around the world, expressing how much it has meant to them to be able to see and hear the prayers and praises that have been offered by this community over the past year and a half. Messages from those whose spirits have been lifted by the liturgy and music of the Church during a time when they needed it most.

*Glory to God in the highest and peace to God’s people on earth.
For the Lord is gracious; his mercy is everlasting, and his truth endures from generation to generation.
Surely it is God who saves me; I will trust in him and not be afraid.*

Friends, these words have not been said and sung for nothing; on the contrary, they have been said and sung for a great Something. A Something so wondrous and so mighty that no danger, no sword, no sickness, no pandemic—not even the gates of hell—shall prevail against it.

And so it matters that we are here this day. It matters that we keep saying and singing what we do, again and again and again. Our presence and our prayers bear witness to the grace and the hope and the love and the salvation that still manifests itself against all odds, in the most unlikely of circumstances and in the least receptive people and places. On this eve of the Feast of St. Luke, then, let us dedicate ourselves anew to telling the old, old story, that our telling might make manifest today the prayer we sang just a few minutes ago:

*Be Thou our great deliverer still,
Thou Lord of life and death;
Restore and quicken, soothe and bless,
With Thine almighty breath.
To hands that work and eyes that see,
Give wisdom’s heavenly lore,
That whole and sick, and weak and strong,
May praise Thee evermore.**

Amen.

*From the hymn “Thine arm, O Lord, in days of old” (text by Edward H. Plumptre, 1864)

