

# Mythinformation

25 February 2007

Bible passage: **Luke 1:1-4** (*The Message*)

“So many others have tried their hand at putting together a story of the wonderful harvest of Scripture and history that took place among us, using reports handed down by the original eyewitnesses who served the Word with their very lives. Since I have investigated all the reports in close detail, starting from the story’s beginning, I decided to write it all out for you, most honorable Theophilus so you can know beyond the shadow of a doubt the reliability of what you were taught.”

**Sermon nugget:** On this first Sunday of Lent, the time leading up to Easter, we will discuss what we can or can’t find out about Jesus from the bible. Is it really all as it seems?

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Did you hear about the Catholic priest and a Methodist pastor from two local churches who were standing by the side of the road, feverishly pounding a handmade sign into the ground with a large rock. The sign read: “The End is Near! Turn Yourself around Now before It’s too Late!”

As a car sped past them, the driver rolled down the window and yelled, “Leave us alone, you religious Nut!” From the curve just ahead, they heard screeching tires and a big splash. The pastor turned to the priest and asked, “Do you think the sign should just say “Bridge Out?”

Well, the sign they put up had words on it, but it wasn’t saying what it looked as though it was trying to say. It seems to me that the Bible is a lot like that. When we’re trying to figure out what it’s really saying, sometimes it isn’t the way it seems.

This is the first Sunday of that period of time leading up to Easter, and it’s a time when we who are trying to be faithful attempt to focus a bit more attentively on our spiritual journey. What do we really know about Jesus and his role in our faith? How much of what we know is factual or historical, and how much is the spin that writers have put on the story over the centuries? That’s what I want us to play around with this morning.

Now if we were to take the Bible passage for today at face value, we might assume that the writer, presumed to be a non-Jewish physician by the name of Luke, is really “telling it like it is.” However, I have to tell you that we need to be careful in just taking it in. We really need to understand the context of the time in which it was written and try to figure out why it was written as it was.

First, let’s look at the passage. Our version from *The Message* reads like this: “So many others have tried their hand at putting together a story of the wonderful harvest of Scripture and history that took place among us, using reports handed down by the original eyewitnesses who served the Word with their very lives. Since I have investigated all the reports in close detail, starting from the story’s beginning, I decided to write it all out for you, most honorable Theophilus

so you can know beyond the shadow of a doubt the reliability of what you were taught.”

If we were to read this passage just as it is written we might quickly assume that this is an actual account of the life of Jesus, but we shouldn’t move in that direction quite so quickly. There are a couple of things we need to know before we can move on into the reading. First, the writings of Luke were at best second generation. They appear in a second group of writings about Jesus.

The first writings were the work of Paul, probably several decades after the death of Jesus, and then came the gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—that were written in the latter part of the first century. Now that means that we’re probably talking about something that was written 40, 50, maybe even 60 years after Jesus died.

The first three gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke—are referred to as the synoptic gospels because they are attempting to tell the story of the life of Jesus. John is very different from those three, offering a theological interpretation of the story that the others are just trying to tell.

It’s important to know that the gospel of Luke, where today’s passage is found, was written after some other things were put down in writing. The gospel of Mark is considered by scholars to be one of the first writings about Jesus, and is one of the sources for both Matthew and Luke. The other primary source is what is referred to as “Q.” Both Mark and Q offer the basic information that Luke embellished and built upon. Actually 2/3 of Mark’s work appears in the gospel of Luke. Talk about plagiarism!

In our Bible passage, Luke is saying to us that he has investigated all the reports that were handed down to him and he is writing it out for his friend Theophilus to know with certainty that what he’s written is really reliable. It’s not made-up. While his intention may well have been that, we have to realize that Luke’s story is written through the lens of later experiences and understandings of who Jesus was and what his life was about. He’s not actually representing what was really there in the first century when Jesus was alive.

Marcus Borg, in his most recent book entitled *Jesus*, talks about reading the Bible in the way that we at The Garden try to read and understand it. He calls that way the “emerging” form of Christianity, and he says that instead of seeing the gospel writings as a divine product and inerrant, and instead of interpreting them literally and factually, “It sees them as human historical products that are to be read as a combination of historical memory and metaphorical narrative.”

In a nutshell, that means that *some* of what they wrote is Jesus as he was remembered, and *some* of it is what had

developed about him in the decades between his death and the writing of the gospels. So that tells us that we have to pay close attention to what we read, because some of it may be a real memory, and other parts may have an overlay of what was said about Jesus in the years after his death.

So, given all that, what do we really know about Jesus? With the exception of the Jewish historian Josephus, most of what we know is through the testimony of people who were devoted to him. Josephus wrote these words about Jesus: "At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who received the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of the Greek." He goes on in two sentences to say that Jesus was condemned to death on a cross, and that those who followed him had not died out.

One of the things that most of us fail to understand about Jesus is that he was not a Christian. Jesus was born a Jew, and he lived and died a Jew. He practiced the Jewish faith, read the Jewish scriptures, knew the Jewish rituals. It was not his intention to start a new religion, but he was, as Borg notes in the subtitle to his book, a "religious revolutionary." He turned things upside down, and caused his followers to look at things a bit differently than before.

In order for us to really figure out what's going on when we read the Bible, and to avoid any "mythinformation," let me give you a little background to put things in perspective. I know that some of us have had the opportunity to travel to the Holy Land, but not that many, so we probably aren't aware of what the land is like, let alone what the time when Jesus lived was like.

The Holy Land of Jesus' time was about the size of the state of New Hampshire, so it wasn't really very big. The climate is fairly moderate there, with some parts seeming like southern California. The terrain is some of the rockiest I've ever seen, but there are areas of great beauty there as well. In the times of Jesus, the land was not an out-of-the-way place. Rather, the Holy Land would have seen plenty of marching armies, as well as caravans of traders crossing the ancient world.

We can only assume that the economic conditions that Jesus experienced growing up were typical of the Jewish people at the time. There was a lot of poverty, and those who've done archeological research are reasonably sure that the family of Jesus was poor, probably living in a small Jewish village in an economically depressed area. The main thing was agriculture, and there were also those who practiced certain trades and crafts—like fishing or carpentry.

We need to remember that Jesus lived in a time when his country was occupied. The Romans had taken control of the country, and the Jewish people were heavily taxed for support of the Roman government and for the religion. The occupation created an air of political unrest which affected all who lived during that time.

We know little or nothing about Jesus during his formative years, but we've no reason to believe that they were anything but normal. He was born into a pious Jewish home and he was nurtured on the first five books of what we sometimes call the Old Testament, as well as the writings of the prophets, like Isaiah and Jeremiah, and others.

There are things we assume, because we simply have no records to tell us more. While that may seem incredible to believe, it really shouldn't. You see, Jesus was often regarded as an unlettered teacher from an obscure little village. He was often seen by the non-Jews as foolhardy—someone who wouldn't amount to much or have much impact on the future. Those who were Jewish didn't quite know what to make of him—not really believing that he was the messiah they were looking for.

This was the kind of world Jesus inhabited, and as we read and study and reflect during this time of Lent, I hope we will take this background into consideration as we try to figure out who Jesus was and is for us, and what difference it makes that he lived. By the time we get to Easter, I'm hopeful that we'll be able at least to say where Jesus fits in, or doesn't, in our own spiritual journey.

To get us started down that path, I'd like to share something that Marcus Borg includes in his book. Borg was given one minute during an interview to sum up his understanding of the life of Jesus. I'd like to leave us with this to think about as we move through Lent. Borg said, "Jesus was from the peasant class. Clearly he was brilliant. His use of language was remarkable and poetic, filled with images and stories. He had a metaphoric mind. He was not an ascetic, but world-affirming, with a zest for life. There was a sociopolitical passion to him—like a Gandhi or a Martin Luther King, he challenged the domination system of his day. He was a religious ecstatic, a Jewish mystic, for whom God was an experiential reality. As such, Jesus was a healer. And there seem to have been a spiritual presence around him, like that reported of St. Francis or the present Dalai Lama. And as a figure of history, Jesus was an ambiguous figure—you could experience him and conclude that he was insane, as his family did, or that he was simple eccentric, or that he was a dangerous threat—or you could conclude that he was filled with the Spirit of God."

So, as we move toward Easter, what would you say about Jesus, if you had one minute to do so?

#### **Closing:**

As we leave here this morning and try to read the Bible through different eyes, I hope and pray we'll be open to experiencing what God would have us experience during this season of life.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.