

Sermon preached by The Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. at St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Durham, NC. October 20, 2007. Feast of St. Luke (observed). Luke 4:14-21 2 Timothy 4:5-13

What do you think when you hear the word, "evangelist"? Many of us have images of television preachers, Bible thumpers, well-dressed, well-coiffed people who are crazy about Jesus, knocking on our door, ranting on the radio, wanting to talk at us about being saved. Evangelist. Are we evangelists? Are we, meek and mild St. Luke's Episcopalians, evangelists? Some of us might be quick to say "no." We might feel somewhat resistant to Paul's exhortation to Timothy in this morning's reading: "As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist..." Today, though, we are celebrating the feast of St. Luke, the evangelist, for whom our parish is named. St. Luke wrote one of the four Gospel or evangelical accounts of Jesus Christ, in our Bible. St. Luke was also an artist and a skilled writer. I invite us this morning then to put aside our stereotypes of evangelists. I invite us to consider St. Luke the artist and St. Luke the evangelist and to consider what it might mean for us to be artful evangelists. Artful evangelists.

It might help us to know that the word, evangelist, comes from a Greek word meaning "to bring good news." It's the same word from which we derive the word "Gospel." If we go back to the Hebrew counterpart of this word, the connotation of good news is that which is brought back from the field of battle. Good news means the battle is won, and the prisoners of war will soon be released. This is the kind of good news referred to in this morning's Gospel lesson from Luke. Jesus reads from the scroll of the prophet, Isaiah, these words: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor." In other words: "He has anointed me to be an evangelist, to deliver the good news that the battle is won, the captives will be released."

So an evangelist is a bearer of good tidings, good news. An evangelist is someone, like the prophet, like Christ, like Luke, who has been to the battle, seen the victory, and come back with a word of encouragement. But what is an artful evangelist? One of the ancient Latin poets said "the art is in hiding the art." In other words, a good artist expresses a lot without revealing every step to the observer. A good artist makes something extremely difficult look graceful. In crafting his story of the good news, the Gospel, Luke artfully did many things at once. He not only told the story of Jesus of Nazareth and his early followers, he placed that story in a context of past, present, and future. Not only did Luke write an account for all time; he wrote an account for a particular community in a particular place and time. His community of Jews and non-Jews needed encouragement as they struggled against rejection and persecution by both Jewish and Roman authorities. So artful was Luke that his community heard the good news and they passed it on. So artful was Luke in his evangelism, that we take it for granted that the story was meant for us, today, as well.

I invite us to be artful evangelists like St. Luke, to bring good news to those weary from battle in ways that are deep and transformative. I witnessed such an act of artful evangelism this week. A group of about thirty people gathered in prayer to mark the

death of Kordero Odum, a young man who was shot and killed in the West End neighborhood of central Durham seven weeks ago. The prayer vigil was sponsored by the Religious Coalition for a Nonviolent Durham, an organization that is trying to heal and prevent the wounds of violence in our community. Children, youth, parents, and elders from the neighborhood and a handful of us who had come from outside the neighborhood stood on Rosedale Avenue a few feet away from the blood-stained spot where Kordero had been shot. We prayed, we heard scripture, we sang. The leader of the vigil invited people to share. Kordero's aunt, Angie Odum Brody, spoke up. It was amazing that Angie was there, because only days before, her son, Keanan Odum, had been stabbed and killed at Northgate Mall. This woman, who had lost a nephew and now a son to violence, addressed the group, especially the young men, Kordero and Keanan's friends. She spoke through her tears and said, "Look at my face. Look at my face. This is what your mother's face will look like if she has to bury you. Don't do that to your mother." I felt helpless and humbled. I wanted to offer some good news. I wanted to be an artful evangelist, but what could I offer this grieving mother? I think about what we heard this morning about bringing good news to the poor. What good news could be offered to this poor mother who loved her son and her nephew? The newspaper has been quick to point out that these young men were criminals, but they had a mother, an aunt, a whole community that loved them. "These young men did not deserve to die," the neighborhood members kept repeating. What good news could be offered to their friends, these battle-scarred young African-American men held captive by poverty, held captive by their lifestyle choices, held captive by a society that does not give them much attention until they do something wrong? What good news could be offered to those of us who had avoided young men like Keanan and Kordero, and who now were convicted by our blindness? I did not try to come up with a good word, because sometimes there just aren't any words. But I think if St. Luke had been there, he might have told me that the good news, the evangelism, was in the event itself. The good news was that a community had chosen to pray over the bloody ground where one of their own had fallen, to ask God to make it holy ground. The good news was in the cry of the mother who had lost a son, a cry for peace. The prayerful presence of people in the street was evangelical. It was a sermon of release to the captives, a sermon more powerful than any sermon preached with words. And I hope that all of us who have been blinded in some way by the violence of this world had our eyes opened just by having to see one another face to face.

St. Luke, the evangelist, would have seen the art in that vigil. What does St. Luke's the parish, see? Can we share God's good news with such grace? When we gather to bring good news to the battle-weary, whether it is on Rosedale Avenue or at the intersection of Hillandale and I-85, we have an opportunity to be artful evangelists. We have an opportunity to be creative and transformative, to go beyond the obvious. Whether the battle involves struggling against violence or disease or an empire, we can bring good news in a way that touches people in a deep and wordless place. When so much of our world is yelling at one another, we could use more of this kind of deep evangelism. I think of the Eucharist itself as an act of artful evangelism. Just bread and wine, but so much more. I think of this building that stands as an artful reminder to drivers on the highway that God is present. Just a building, but so much more. I think of the outreach

ministries, the education offerings, the simple acts of hospitality: all are moments of artful evangelism. And yet we could do so much more. I would like to dream of the church and of this parish that bears the name of such a one as St. Luke as an art school, a place where we learn how to creatively fulfill our Baptismal promise to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ. We are evangelists, and we can dream of new ways to touch people's hearts. We can dream of ways to proclaim good news not just to the poor but with the poor, not just to the captives but in recognition that we are all captives. In this school for artful evangelism, we can learn, with God's help, not just to say the message but to be the message, not just to write the message but to have the message written on our hearts. Amen.