
Narrative Lectionary

Year 3 | The Year of Luke

Scripture Readings

May 2, 2021

*The Fifth Sunday
of Easter*

About the text

“THE BIBLE SAYS IT. I believe it. That settles it.”
So the bumper sticker goes.

The young movement springing out of the well-established Jewish tradition did not have that kind of certitude. Jesus and his first followers were all Jewish. The first “Word-bearers” who went out into the world were Jewish. Those who heard and believed? Not so much.

Whether one was in good standing with this movement would have been a simple question. But...there was the very personal, very public matter of circumcision. Some folks—call them the “one true church” if you’d like—wanted to be sure that the men-folk all carried this mark of tender irrevocable belonging.

This was a question with real, painful consequences for new believers.



Acts 15:1-18

1 Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”² And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.³ So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers.⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.⁵ But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, “It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.”

6 The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter.⁷ After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers.⁸ And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us;⁹ and in cleansing

1 It wasn't long before some Jews showed up from Judea insisting that everyone be circumcised: “If you're not circumcised in the Mosaic fashion, you can't be saved.”² Paul and Barnabas were up on their feet at once in fierce protest. The church decided to resolve the matter by sending Paul, Barnabas, and a few others to put it before the apostles and leaders in Jerusalem.

3 After they were sent off and on their way, they told everyone they met as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria about the breakthrough to the Gentile outsiders. Everyone who heard the news cheered—it was terrific news!

4 When they got to Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas were graciously received by the whole church, including the apostles and leaders. They reported on their recent journey and how God had used them to open things up to the outsiders.⁵ Some Pharisees stood up to say their piece. They had become believers, but continued to hold to the hard party line of the Pharisees. “You have to circumcise the pagan converts,” they said. “You must make them keep the Law of Moses.”

6 The apostles and leaders called a special meeting to consider the matter.⁷ The arguments went on and on, back and forth, getting more and more heated. Then Peter took the floor: “Friends, you well know that from early on God

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their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. ¹⁰ Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

¹² The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. ¹³ After they finished speaking, James replied, “My brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴ Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. ¹⁵ This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,

¹⁶ ‘After this I will return, · and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, · ¹⁷ so that all other peoples may seek the Lord— even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things ¹⁸ known from long ago.’

The Message

made it quite plain that he wanted the pagans to hear the Message of this good news and embrace it—and not in any secondhand or roundabout way, but firsthand, straight from my mouth. ⁸ And God, who can’t be fooled by any pretense on our part but always knows a person’s thoughts, gave them the Holy Spirit exactly as he gave him to us. ⁹ He treated the outsiders exactly as he treated us, beginning at the very center of who they were and working from that center outward, cleaning up their lives as they trusted and believed him.

¹⁰ “So why are you now trying to out-god God, loading these new believers down with rules that crushed our ancestors and crushed us, too? ¹¹ Don’t we believe that we are saved because the Master Jesus amazingly and out of sheer generosity moved to save us just as he did those from beyond our nation? So what are we arguing about?”

¹² There was dead silence. No one said a word. With the room quiet, Barnabas and Paul reported matter-of-factly on the miracles and wonders God had done among the other nations through their ministry. ¹³ The silence deepened; you could hear a pin drop.

James broke the silence. “Friends, listen. ¹⁴ Simeon has told us the story of how God at the very outset made sure that racial outsiders were included.

¹⁵ This is in perfect agreement with the words of the prophets:

¹⁶ After this, I’m coming back; I’ll rebuild David’s ruined house; · I’ll put all

the pieces together again; I'll make it look like new · ¹⁷ So outsiders who seek will find, so they'll have a place to come to, · All the pagan peoples included in what I'm doing.

“God said it and now he's doing it. ¹⁸ It's no afterthought; he's always known he would do this.

Luke 2:29-32

29 “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; · ³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, · ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

29 God, you can now release your servant; release me in peace as you promised.

30 With my own eyes I've seen your salvation; ³¹ it's now out in the open for everyone to see: · ³² A God-revealing light to the non-Jewish nations, and of glory for your people Israel.

The Narrative Lectionary presents the story of God's work in humanity through a single Gospel each year. This is Year 3: The Year of Luke.