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Beyond History

John H. Tietjen

The following is the sermon preached at the funeral service of Dr. Carl S. Meyer on Dec. 20, 1972. The text is Luke 1:1-4.

If Dr. Carl S. Meyer were the preacher at this service, the sermon would probably begin something like this: "On this day, 20 December, in the year of our Lord 1552, Katherine von Bora, Dr. Martin Luther's beloved wife Katie, died." There might then be similar references to significant happenings on this day in history, and then Dr. Meyer would point out the meaning of these events for what we are doing here today. Through these events he would proclaim the Word of God to us. Brother Carl was a historian with a purpose beyond history.

Dr. Meyer was like Luke the evangelist, whose words are the text for this sermon. Luke was a historian, he himself tells us. He says, "Many have done their best to write a report of the things that have taken place among us. They wrote what we have been told by those who saw these things from the beginning and proclaimed the message." Since Luke himself had "carefully studied all these matters from their beginning," he thought it good to write an orderly account for Theophilus, a man with some prominence in government. His purpose, he tells us, is that Theophilus might know the full truth concerning the matters which he had been taught.

Our brother Carl was also a historian. His vocation was to study and teach church history. His writings give the evidence of how careful and thorough he was in his study and research. He had special competence in the Reformation period and in Missouri Synod history; both interests are reflected in his extracurricular responsibilities as executive director of the Foundation for Reformation Research and as editor of the *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*.

As a historian he had a passion for scholarship; his footnotes were on occasion as long as his essays. He pursued his scholarly interests for a time as director of our School for Graduate Studies and until his death as Graduate Professor of Historical Theology. For the past 20 years he was a devoted servant of this seminary and wrote the definitive history of our school.

As a historian Dr. Meyer knew how much of a problem history is for us. We are born into a life ruled by the law of sin and death. Our experience of existence is so very much the same as that of the countless generations that have preceded us. Our life is an ongoing succession of days and nights for which life itself provides no clue of meaning. George Santayana has written:

As in the midst of battle there is room
For thoughts of love, and in foul
sin for mirth,
As gossips whisper of a trinket's
worth
Spied by the death-bed's flickering
candle-gloom;
As in the crevices of Caesar's tomb
The sweet herbs flourish on a little
earth:
So in this great disaster of our
birth
We can be happy, and forget our doom.
For morning, with a ray of tenderest
joy
Gilding the iron heaven, hides the
truth,
And evening gently woos us to employ
Our grief in idle catches. Such is
youth;
Till from that summer's trance we wake,
to find
Despair before us, vanity behind.

"Absurd" is the judgment of those who look history full in the face and do not flinch. History is a prison of evil from which there is no escape. We try to invest life with meaning—through our family, our jobs, our grasping for things; but we don't succeed. We try to protect ourselves from evil, but, as this seminary community has discovered this past fortnight, evil comes crashing in on us unexpected and un-masks our vulnerability. Caught in the grip of evil ourselves, we perpetrate it against others. Nation goes to war against nation. Brother flies at the throat of brother. And not we, but death has the last word. The historian is second to none in coming face to face with the futility and evil of our existence in history.

Of course, St. Luke was more than a historian. He was an evangelist. His two-volume work for which our text is the dedicatory preface is the proclamation of God's good news. The central message of his writing is that the Spirit of God who has come among men in the person of Jesus and done wonderful works through Him has been poured out on those who believe in Jesus and done wonderful works through them. God has acted in human history through Jesus. God acts now in human history in our lives as we believe in Jesus. He sets us free from the rule of the law of sin and death. God himself rules. He forgives our sins and heals our diseases. He makes us alive with His indwelling Spirit. He shows us love as the key to life's purpose. He promises us victory over death in a life that is eternal. St. Luke wrote it down—this history that is more than history—not just for Theophilus but for those to come in the history that followed him—for the likes of us.

Our brother Carl shared in the central reality proclaimed by Luke's Gospel-history. Though he was born on the 12th of March, 1907, as the son of the Reverend and Mrs. George Meyer,

he was born anew as a son of God in his holy baptism. The Spirit of God which descended on Jesus in his baptism came down to bring eternal life to young Carl. Throughout his life he wrestled with the problems of our mortality and experienced human frailty in his own body. Yet the power of God was at work in him. He was a man of love and peace, a devoted husband and father. His was a quiet faith exhibited in gentle dignity. He acknowledged the reality of God's presence in his life through worship, regularly joining students in early morning Matins as well as with the rest of us in midmorning chapel.

More than a historian, Dr. Meyer was a teacher of historical theology. As a pastor and teacher of the church he shared Luke's purpose in his writing. He devoted his talents to the task of preparing men for the church's ministry. His aim in his work was to do his part in helping the church carry out its mission. The church needs a sense of history. It is important for us to know who we are as we do our work. Therefore it is essential that we know the heritage from which we have come. But as Dr. Meyer knew, our study of history must serve us in our task of proclaiming the good news of God's presence and action in our history. That was illustrated in a scene I experienced when I visited him in the hospital while he was recuperating from his first heart attack. On the table at his bedside was a recently published volume of Martin Luther's devotional writings. When I asked how he was enjoying his reading, he pointed out that he and Lucille were reading a portion each night as part of their evening devotion.

The promise of the Gospel Dr. Meyer himself proclaimed is true for him. He has eternal life. Our seminary's Board of Control began its most recent meeting on the evening of the day of Dr. Meyer's death. It was at this meeting that I was recom-

mending that he be granted a sabbatical for the coming year. We said to one another at the meeting that God had given him a far better sabbath rest. "There still remains for God's people a rest like God's resting on the seventh day" (Heb. 4:9). Carl entered that rest on the Lord's Day, the day of resurrection. As today we lay his body to rest in the earth, we are confident of resurrection and the life of the world to come. For our Lord has told us, "I am the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in Me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die" (John 11:25-26). Our loved one and colleague is now beyond history.

But we are still in it. We continue to experience life's ambiguities and uncertainties. We come face to face with the evil of our historical existence and wonder about God's love and justice. The Tempter lures us to abandon faith and hope. Today I invite you to reaffirm the faith we share together. Trust God's good news. He was

present among us and active in our history to rescue us from its evil. God will continue to be with you, Lucille, to be your Advocate and Guide and to share with you the peace the world cannot give. As God has showered us all with His love in the past, so He will do in the days to come. Believe Him, and you will see that it is so.

Today as we reaffirm our faith, let's learn from the example of our loved one and colleague. Each of us has his own calling and vocation in life—historian, exegete, preacher, teacher, pastor, mother, student. Be what God has called you to be. Use what you are for our common mission; as Luke formulates it, that repentance and forgiveness of sins be preached in Jesus' name to all nations. Like our departed brother in Christ, do your thing to help the world wake up to the reality of God at work among us to save.

St. Louis, Mo.