

The Gospel of Luke: Thoughts at the Starting Gate

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I. Introduction

A. Imagine that you are you, only you were born almost 2,000 years ago in the Middle East during the Roman Empire. Caesar is in control, believes he's a god and expects everyone to call him "Lord." Taxes are crushing, but the empire provides peace and stability, and your life works. You received a good education and have a good job.

B. Also imagine that, though you are a Gentile, you've been drawn to the beliefs – the morality, the ethics and monotheism – of the Jews. You have not converted. You are not about to sign up for all of the laws and customs – the ceremonial regulations, special diet and all that was handed down from Moses. But you think there is something there. And you just heard a man named Paul talk about a man named Jesus, who he claimed is The One the Jews have been waiting for – the One who pulls everything together; the One who was able to defeat evil and conquered death. And – and! - Paul claims that in Christ, you – a Gentile – can become a full heir of the promises of God. You can be forgiven, granted eternal life, adopted into the family of God, all without becoming a Jew - without keeping the Jewish calendar, food laws, circumcision and the like.

C. You're not sure what to make of this. You've heard a bit about Jesus before. And the numbers of those following him is clearly growing. But not everyone is signing up.

1. The Greek philosophers are laughing at the suggestion that Jesus was God – the very idea that God could and would become a man, enter this material world was a non-starter.

2. And lots of Jews were not following Christ. They said he didn't do the chief thing the Messiah was supposed to do – restore them to power. Plus, he was crucified... on a tree. That meant he was cursed by God.

D. On top of this, some of those who were following Christ seem to disagree with Paul. They say that in order for you to be a Christ-follower you have to become a Jew first. They scoff at the idea that the promises made to Abraham have been freely extended to you. They demand that you keep all of their laws plus follow Christ. And Paul has said that not everyone who claims to be a Christian actually is one.

E. What are you going to do about all of this? Where are you going to go for answers? Who – or what – can you trust?

F. I have good news: the Gospel of Luke was written for you.

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- II. We begin a new series today, one based on what is often called the third Gospel.
- A. As you may know, the New Testament provides us with four biographies of Jesus. They are not biographies per se, because they do not tell us much of what a biographer would report. Indeed, they tell us almost nothing of Christ's life up until the time he is thirty. And even then, they are heavily skewed towards his last days on earth. But they are about him and they are written to persuade people that he is the Savior of the World.
- B. Matthew writes for a Jewish audience. Mark for a Roman one. John writes for Greeks and Luke for Gentiles. It's the same story – there is lots of overlap, especially between Matthew, Mark and Luke – but they each tell the story from a different angle.
- C. Luke, which is the longest – it contains 1,151 verses – gives particular attention to: Gentiles, women, the poor, the Holy Spirit and the teaching of Jesus.¹ In fact, half of the 1,151 verses - 568 to be exact – are Jesus' words.
- D. We're going to be here for a while. We'll take a number of breaks and we'll let the text launch us into a handful of mini-series along the way. But we are going to be here a while. And I couldn't be more excited. This is such a great and helpful book.
- III. Let's jump in with the first four verses: Luke 1:1-4
- A. *Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us,*
- B. Luke doesn't open with a genealogy like Matthew does. Matthew, who was writing for the Jews wanted to start by firmly establishing that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament.) Luke doesn't go that far, but he does make the connection.
- C. He does not say, "many have set out to write an account of the things that *happened* among us." He says, "many have set out to write an account of the things that have been *fulfilled* among us - which ties Jesus back to the Messianic prophecies made in the Old Testament.

¹ Luke is also known for focusing on: prayer, the Holy Spirit, the humanity of Christ and joy.

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D. You cannot fully understand Jesus if you start with the New Testament. What you get is jaw-dropping. Jesus will jump off the page. He will be wise and wonderful at levels no one else can approach, and he will make the most outrageous claims ever – claims that go far beyond those made by anyone in history. What you will get is an inescapable person.² But you can't fully appreciate Jesus if you start with Jesus. That is like coming into the movie when it's three-fourths of the way over. Luke knows that and starts by linking Jesus back to our Old Testament.

E. Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word.

F. The word used here for Word is *logos*. So, this is a reference to Christ.

G. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you

H. First century writers were not as driven by *chronos* – the chronology of time – as we are. They were more focused on the *kairos* moment – the special, unique things that were happening. John's Gospel, for instance, is arranged more thematically than chronologically. But Luke is more orderly than any of the others and he tells us that. He has set out to write an "orderly" account.

I. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

J. I am writing this so that you may have greater confidence in Christ. I am writing so that your faith may be more solid.

IV. Let's pause here for a few introductions. We'll start with Luke.

² Tim Keller has said, "We do not get a fool-proof argument for God, what we get is a fool-proof person." The Bible does not give us an airtight argument for God's existence. It does not give us philosophical proofs. What it gives us is an inescapable person. A person we cannot get around.

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- A. Luke does not tell us that he wrote the Gospel of Luke. He does not say, “I am Luke, a disciple of Christ, a friend of Paul.” In fact, his name is not mentioned in the book at all. We know that he wrote it because Luke and Acts go together as a two volume set – the first is a biography of Jesus and the second a biography of the church – and we know that Luke wrote Acts.³
- B. Luke is a Gentile⁴ – that is, he is not a Jew. He is the only non-Jew to write any of the books of the Bible.⁵
- C. Luke is very bright. We can tell by the quality of his Greek that he is an educated man. When you have a Greek exam at Trinity you are hoping that the professor does not pick anything by Luke or in Hebrews because it was written at a higher level. Indeed, Luke’s a physician and a historian.⁶
- D. And he’s also a good guy and a loyal friend. At the end of Paul’s life, Luke is the only one who sticks with him. (Paul will write that everyone had deserted him except for Luke.)⁷ And an early description of Luke – found in a commentary that some believe is from the second century⁸ – describes him as:

³ This is the established view and it was also the view of the early church leaders – e.g., Jerome, Eusebius, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, etc. The oldest manuscript of Luke (P75), which is dated around 200 AD, carries the attribution, “the Gospel according to Luke.” There are some who disagree. Over the 2,000 years that this book has been studied, some have offered different views. Furthermore, some who study the Bible do so with the conviction that there is no God and that nothing supernatural ever happens. As a general rule, those in this camp date things much later. They do this because they need to be removed from eye witnesses and because any prophecies that are fulfilled must have already been fulfilled at the time the book was written. I write as one who believes! – and as a general rule, most of the people I study write from the position of faith as well. However, I do read enough of the “critical scholarship” to know what they are saying. Almost everyone agrees that Luke wrote both Luke and Acts, but there are a few who disagree.

⁴ See Col. 4:10-11, contrasted with 14.

⁵ As an aside, Luke wrote more of the New Testament than anyone else. Paul wrote 13 different letters – 14 if he wrote Hebrews. We are not sure. But some of his letters were very short. By actual word count, Luke wrote more than Paul.

⁶ One scholar – Graham Stanton – argues that the opening sentence in the Gospel of Luke is, “the most finely composed sentence in the whole of post-Classical Greek literature.”

⁷ 2 Timothy 4:11

⁸ This description is found in, *The Anti-Marcionite Prologue to the Gospel of Luke*, a document some believe was written about 100 years after Luke’s death.

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1. ... a native of Antioch, by profession a physician. He had become a disciple of the apostle Paul and later followed Paul until his [Paul's] martyrdom. Having served the Lord continuously, unmarried and without children, filled with the Holy Spirit he died at the age of 84 years.

E. I hope and pray that something similar may be said about us – that is, that we “serve the Lord continuously, and die, filled with the Holy Spirit.”

F. As an aside, we see with Luke the benefits Paul ascribes to being single. Luke was free to travel around with Paul and serve others.⁹ He gave up a lot for Christ, but for two thousand years several billion people have benefited from his contributions.

V. The second person we need to meet is Theophilus – or, “most excellent Theophilus” as he is described.

A. There are a number of theories as to whom he is. The name *Theophilus* is a combination of two Greek words - *theos* is Greek for God, *phileo* is Greek for brotherly love. So, Theophilus means “lover of God” or “friend of God.” This has led some to suggest he’s not a real person, just a symbol for all Christians. I don’t think that’s true. The “most excellent” part is an honorific title given to government officials.¹⁰

⁹ You have to think Luke could have found a woman to marry him had that been something he wanted to do. “Hi, my name is Luke. Have you heard of the Bible? Yeah, well, I wrote parts of it. Did I mention I was a doctor?”

¹⁰ The phrase “most excellent” (*kratistos*) is used to refer to Governor Felix (Acts 23:26; 24:3) and Governor Festus (Acts 26:25).

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B. Some think he is a sympathetic pagan and that Luke is writing to persuade him to become a Christian. That is, that this is an evangelistic tract.¹¹ Others think that Theophilus is already a follower of Christ, and that Luke is writing to help him move to the next level.¹² I'm in this second camp. And I want to go one step further. I believe that Theophilus is funding Luke's work. The introduction to this book – the mention of Theophilus here at the beginning – suggests that he was sponsoring Luke.¹³

C. Theophilus has money and power and questions. He has a lot to lose by following Christ. So before he changes his FaceBook status – before he updates it to say that he is a Christ follower, he wants someone to do some more work. To ask: *Did he really walk on water and raise the dead? Did he really yell at nature and it obeyed? Did he really turn a boy's Happy Meal into enough food to feed 10,000 people?* He wants someone to go to Mary and ask, *So, you were 14 when an angel appeared to you, and your response was to ask a few questions and then break out in song?* He wants someone to talk to James and Jude, Jesus' brothers, and say, *So, Christ was your older brother. Was he really perfect? What was that like? I'm thinking not so great.*

D. Theophilus wants someone to investigate the story and Luke is exactly the right kind of person to do an investigation: he knows all the players from his travels with Paul; he's a doctor – which means he'd be among the last to casually accept the idea of a virgin birth or healing miracles; and he's an amateur historian.¹⁴

¹¹ There are two reasons to suspect this is not the case: 1) Neither Luke nor Acts are marked with the directness and simplicity normally characteristic of an apologetic case; 2) Luke 1:4 suggests that Theophilus has already been taught (literally, "catechized.") This suggests that Theophilus had already received the normal basic instruction in the faith. (See I Cor. 14:9; Gal. 6:6; Acts 18:25).

¹² There is a third view as well, though it is held by very few. It suggests that the Theophilus that Luke was writing to was the Roman-imposed High Priest of Israel between AD 37 and AD 41 – that is, Theophilus ben Ananus.

¹³ Liberation Theologians – a 20th century movement often associated with Latin America – have often used Luke to argue that Jesus was a Marxist / socialist. There is something ironic about the fact that the book was made possible by a wealthy patron!

¹⁴ Please note that the Bible did not arrive from heaven, nor did the authors simply engage in divine dictation. There are two errors to avoid. The first is believing that the Bible was the product of God alone, the second is to believe that it is the result of human effort alone.

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E. And Luke wants to do this as well. Others had already written up reports about Christ. This would likely include Mark and Matthew (though not John.)¹⁵ But they have not done exactly what he wants to do, and now is the time. The window for the kind of investigation he wants to do is closing. Many of the eye-witnesses are still alive but they are not going to live a lot longer. He wants to talk to them, now is the time. But he's got to live.¹⁶

F. And so, in God's providence these two men form a partnership. Luke does the work. Theophilus writes the checks and the result is something that several billion of us have profited from.

VI. I want to make two other big points as we launch this study. First, I want you to understand that what we get with Luke is a true story. I want to emphasize the word true for a minute.

A. Luke does really good work – he tells us that he did an investigation and wanted to provide us with an orderly account, and that is what we get. This may not be noteworthy to you, because you have come to trust that the Bible is a divinely inspired book – coauthored by God and man. But, not everyone has. In fact, one of the very first questions an educated person – then and now! – wants to know is, where did you get your information? How do we know it's true?

B. Luke tells us that he did an investigation and he reported things accurately, and we have a handful of reasons to believe that's the case – that what we have is a true story.

C. First – this is the way the text reads. It does not sound like legend. It does not open, “a long time ago in a faraway land.” It opens with exact locations and lots of reference points to leaders – which is how the ancients dated things.

¹⁵ The church has long recognized four canonical Gospels – that is, four books that were written by men who were inspired by the Holy Spirit and given to us for our edification. There were other Gospels as well. These fell into two categories: 1) those that were written by eye-witnesses but lost; and 2) those that were written much later (hundreds of years) and tell a different story – e.g., the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Judas. These do not tell us anything new or trustworthy about Christ, but do help us understand the aberrant beliefs of the group that put them forward. Most were written by Gnostics – those who believed that Jesus was God but not a real man, and who believe that the way to be saved was through secret knowledge.

¹⁶ We think he writes Luke in the early 60s. The Beach Boys are still big but the Beatles are about to cross the Atlantic and eclipse them.

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D. The second reason we should trust the story is because it was written so soon after the events being described. We suspect that Luke was written in the early 60s – about thirty years after Christ’s death.¹⁷ By way of a reference point, King Arthur – if he lived at all – lived in the 5th or 6th century AD, and the first written records we have of him were written down 400 years later, long after every eye-witness was dead. Luke wrote within 25 – 40 years of the events.¹⁸ If I wanted to tell stories about what went on here four hundred years ago – in 1612 – no one could refute me. If I made up things about what went on here in the 1980s people could say, “What are you talking about. I was here 30 years ago and none of that stuff happened.” By way of a recent example, about six weeks ago Jason, our youngest son, came down to breakfast before school dressed in the most ridiculous clothes I’ve ever seen. And I asked, “What’s that all about?” He said, “It’s spirit week at school. Today’s 80s day. Isn’t this great?” And I said, “I was in college in the 80s. That is not the 80s. I never dressed like that. I never saw anyone who dressed like that and I would never have gone near anyone dressed like that.” You can’t make things up about what was going on thirty years ago.

E. A third reason we can trust Luke in particular – and the Gospels in general – is because of what they report. Some of it is counter-productive! Some say, “You can’t trust the Gospels because they were written by Christians. They had an agenda. They wanted to promote their movement.” Yes, they had an agenda and that is why you can trust them.

1. Let’s set aside a really, really big point. Many of the early Christians – including the disciples – died for the story. They couldn’t offer any higher testimony to its accuracy than that.

2. And it’s because they believed in Christ that they wanted to get the story right and so – as we will see – they included things they would never have included if they didn’t happen.

- a) Look at account of the death of Jesus. The night before his death all 4 Gospels writers have Jesus asking, “Can I get out of this?”

¹⁷ We date the writing of Luke based on the final events being reported in The Book of Acts. We know that Luke was written before Acts was, and we know that Acts was written before the destruction of Jerusalem.

¹⁸ The arguments around the dating of the Gospels are – as noted – complex. However, a strong argument for the early writing of the Gospels flows from the fact that none of them mention the destruction of the Temple, which occurred in 70 A.D. This is significant because Jesus had prophesied that it would be destroyed (Luke 21:6; Mt. 24:1; Mark 13:1). Such an obvious fulfillment of a prophecy would have been included in the Gospels if they were written after 70 AD.

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- b) On the cross they have him crying out, “My God you have deserted me, forsaken me.”
- c) Who was there when he was born? Shepherds – the dregs of society
- d) His mother was unwed – horrific back then. You wouldn’t have made that up.
- e) Who is there to witness the resurrection? The first witnesses were women who, at that time, could not testify.¹⁹

3. The only reason those incidents were recorded is because they happened.

F. A fourth reason to trust Luke is because so much of what he has written has been affirmed by research – by archeology and other historical digging. His descriptions of towns and cities as well as the names and titles of various officials is spot on. This is not to say that secular historians all agree with everything Luke says. Remember, he reports miracles – so, some write him off right out of the gate. But those who look at what he has said that can be verified are given pause.

1. The late Sir William Ramsay, a distinguished archeology professor at Oxford – who was knighted for his great contributions to scholarship and who received 9 honorary doctorates from leading schools all over the world - wrote: “Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy...he should be placed among the very greatest historians.”²⁰

¹⁹ An additional reason to trust the Gospel is that the literary style is too detailed to be fabricated. The Gospels are filled with detail that is unnecessary to the narrative – e.g., in Luke 4 we are told that Jesus was sleeping on a cushion; in John 8 we are told that Jesus was doodling in the dust; in John 21 we are told that there were 153 fish. These kinds of details were not found in action fiction. (They are today, so we do not appreciate how odd it was.) These details are included because someone remembered them. (They happened). C.S. Lewis puts it perfectly in his essay on biblical criticism: “I have been reading poems, romances, vision-literature, legends, myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know that not one of them is like this. Of this text there are only two possible views. Either this is reportage ... pretty close up to the facts; nearly as close as Boswell. Or else, some unknown writer in the second century, without known predecessors or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern, novelistic, realistic narrative... The reader who doesn't see this has simply not learned to read.”

²⁰ The quote is from William Ramsay, *The Bearing of recent Discovery On the Trustworthiness of the New Testament*, 1915, p. 222. Wikipedia describes Ramsay as a Scottish archeologist and New Testament scholar who, by his death in 1939 had “become the foremost authority of his day on the history of Asia Minor and a leading scholar in the study of the New Testament. From the post of Professor of Classical Art and Architecture at Oxford, he was appointed Regius Professor of Humanity (the Latin Professorship) at Aberdeen. Knighted in 1906 to mark his distinguished service to the world of scholarship, Ramsay also gained three honorary fellowships from Oxford colleges, nine honorary doctorates from British, Continental and North American universities and became an honorary member of almost every association devoted to archaeology and historical research. He was one of the original members of the British Academy, was awarded the Gold Medal of Pope Leo XIII in 1893 and the Victorian Medal of the Royal Geographical Society in 1906.

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2. And E.M. Blaiklock, professor of classics at Auckland University wrote, “For accuracy of detail, and for evocation of atmosphere, Luke stands, in fact, with Thucydides. The Acts of the Apostles is not the shoddy product of pious imagining, but a trustworthy record... it was the spadework of archeology which first revealed the truth.”²¹

G. What we have is true story. Luke did his homework. As Paul’s travel companion, he undoubtedly had received a lot of information about Jesus already, not just from Paul, but also from the other apostles. But he wanted more. So he interviewed the people – Mary, the shepherds, the man who was healed of blindness. He was not interested in rumors or hearsay. He wanted the facts. And that is what he reports. His record is based on eyewitnesses.²²

H. Which means that Luke is saying this: it’s true. Don’t believe what I am reporting because it’s exciting – though it is. Don’t believe what I am reporting because Jesus will meet your needs – though He will. Don’t believe this account because it will give you hope – though it will. Believe it because it’s true. If it’s not true, it will not help you. It might be touching, moving, whatever – but it will not save you. This is true.²³

VII. The second big kick off point is that it’s not just a true story. It’s a true story.²⁴

A. What I mean by this is that the Gospel of Luke is not a compendium of Christ’s teachings. It’s not simply a book of his sayings, a collection of vignettes. It’s a story – a narrative. And this is important because the fact that it is the story means that it’s not the teachings of Jesus that saves you, but the actions.

B. With the founders of other religions what you focus on is what they taught, not what they did. It’s their insights that matter because you are going to be saved by what you do – by how you live, so you need to be instructed on what to do. That is not what we get with Jesus. That is not the story that is reported in the Gospel of Luke. Christ does teach in the Gospels. And Luke records more of it than any of the others. But the teaching of Christ is not the main thing.

²¹ E.M. Blaiklock, *The Archeology of the New Testament*, Zondervan, 1970, p. 96.

²² Luke reports that he delivered what people saw. The Greek word for delivered is *paradosis*. This is a technical term for passing along eye-witness material orally without changing it at all. It was a practice. It was a skill.

²³ Too often people today argue that Christianity works, therefore it’s true. The early followers of Christ did not do this. Perhaps in part because believing in Christ would not lead to an easy life – it would lead to death! They did not argue “it works, therefore it’s true.” They argued, “it’s true, therefore it works.”

²⁴ Thanks to Tim Keller for this insight.

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C. And by the way, if you've not studied the teachings of Jesus very carefully, you are in for a big surprise. Because much of what he says is not elevating and inspirational; it's devastating. Far from being morally uplifting a lot of what he says is horrible.

1. Virginia Stem Owens, an college English professor, knew that students had heard of the Sermon on the Mount but suspected that they'd not read it. So she assigned a paper on it. And after reading it, the students wrote: *I did not like the Sermon on the Mount. It made me feel like I had to be perfect, and no one is; The things this sermon asks for are stupid and unrealistic; Jesus not only required people to give their money away, but to do it joyfully; He not only forbid killing people, but disdaining people, feeling superior or feeling cold or indifferent; Jesus not only said "not to worry," he commanded us to be grateful and content with whatever situation we have.*

2. They were shocked. They were expecting something inspirational. What does Christ's birth inspire you to do? Be a shepherd? Have your kids in a barn? Have them out of wedlock? They expected something different because they think that Jesus is giving advice that will complete us. But part of what we get from Christ is an understanding that we can't do it. The standard is too high. We don't simply need a teacher we need a Savior. We do not simply need Christ to enlighten us, but to rescue us. We do not need someone to tell us what to do. We need someone to do it for us.²⁵

D. If it's inspiration that you are after, the Gospel of Luke is not going to deliver. It doesn't work that way. But Luke claims that it's a true story, and that changes everything, because it means that God really did show up on earth for you! He came for us. He died for us. Everything that needs to have happened for us to redeemed has been done by Christ.

E. We are embarking on a study of a true story. I can't wait.

VIII. Let me end with two quick appeals.

²⁵ As Keller notes, this is the reason why the story of Jesus has to be true for everyone or it doesn't work for anyone. The things Buddha and Mohammed did work for them within their system whether historic or not. Because their purpose was to instruct. But the purpose of Jesus miracles it not to instruct us, but to save us.

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A. First, understand that the purpose of the Gospels – Mathew, Mark, Luke and John – is to persuade people to place their faith in Christ. The Gospel writers are often referred to as the evangelists. Evangel means “good news.” The goal was not – is not – simply to report information, it was to persuade people to believe so that they may have eternal life. So... this would be a great time to invite your friends. To join you in church or to join you in your small group, discussing the Gospel of Luke. We are providing you with more resources than ever to do this: you have an insert in your bulletin that shows you the study guide that we will provide every week online; my sermon notes – and more, because I do not have time to say everything in the sermon – my sermon notes are on line; we have some additional video support for you. Now is a great time to be sure you – and your friends – are in a small group study. So, first, invite your friends to church.

B. Second, read the Gospel of Luke this week. It will take you two hours. Fifteen to twenty minutes per day to read the whole thing in a week. Read it this week. Hey, read it several times. Read it in several translations. This material is 100 percent better for you than most of the junk you put in your brain.

IX. Announcements

A. Pray

B. Alpha / Alpha Marriage

C. Small Groups – insert shows you some of the resources for additional study, especially for small groups. This material is available on line, along with a manuscript of the sermon, additional notes and a video summary. We are pushing to get you to go deeper, think longer, meditate more – to apply what we are studying. BTW, if you need a Bible in order to study Luke – or to read it! – we have them available for free for you.

D. Signups for:

1. Community dinner on Sat. January 26 – Mexican Food night
2. Guest luncheon after 11 service
3. Next week there is a membership class here.

E. We have a food drive going on between now and the Souper Bowl.

F. A number of places – such as at Forrestal – where they are looking for people to serve.

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G. RAMP UP starts tomorrow. Monday morning discussion about the weekend sermon. 6 AM. Over by 7:15. Mike Woodruff is leading it. If you want to show up, please RSVP so there is enough bagels and coffee.