

Truthful stories

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I have neither given or received, nor have I tolerated others' use of unauthorized aid. At the university where I teach part time, students write this honor code statement on every exam, essay and homework submission. It is up to the instructor to identify what constitutes authorized aid for each assignment or exam.

When Luke set out to write his “orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us,” there seems to have been no concept of unauthorized aid. The author freely draws on the Gospel of Mark and the unknown source (Q) shared with the writer of Matthew. He tweaks these stories and rearranges them for his purposes. Luke also has unique sources for stories and sayings that are found in neither Matthew nor Mark.

This week’s Gospel reading, Jesus raising the son of the widow of Nain, is one such story found only in Luke. But Luke’s telling of the story resembles the story in the first reading, of Elijah’s role in God’s restoring life to the son of the widow at Zarephath. While details differ, there are enough similarities that Luke’s audience would have drawn connections to this ancient story.

In fact, Luke has set up this connection already when Jesus engages in discussions in the synagogue following his inaugural address in Nazareth (Luke 4:16f). Jesus also makes reference there to the healing of the gentile Naaman, which has parallels to last week’s gospel and the healing of the centurion’s servant (2 Kings 5 and Luke 7:1–10). The latter story also has similarities with an account of healing a centurion’s servant found in Matthew (8:5–13).

The stories of the raising of the widow's son and the healing of the centurion's servant in Luke come immediately before the encounter with John the Baptist's disciples (Luke 7:18). Speaking on behalf of John, they ask if Jesus is the one who is to come or if they are to look for another. Jesus points them to what they have seen happening—healing and resurrection and preaching of good news.

Furthermore, Luke uses these two stories to accentuate themes that are central in his Gospel: God at work among the gentiles, and God's special care for outsiders and those who are the most vulnerable. Luke is masterful in using story—not as a conveyor of facts, but to transmit truth and to unfold the Jesus story in an orderly way.

Those who preach might reflect on their own use of story. How does story transmit truth? Does the story point to God's activity? Is the story connected to the larger narrative of God's work throughout the history of God's people? Will the story help to open up truths central to God's good news?