

LEARNING FROM THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

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The First Sunday of Advent

November 28, 2021

Well, here we are at the beginning of Advent—amazingly—and of a new church year. One of the many reasons that this Sunday is such an important and exciting one is because it is the Sunday, each year, in which we turn our collective attention to a new Gospel. For the past year (Year B), we have been mostly in the Gospel of Mark. Now, for the next year (Year C), we will be mostly in Luke.

So, let's take a moment to remind ourselves of the distinctiveness of this gospel. We are moving from the rough, earthy Greek language of the Gospel of Mark to a very high, educated Greek. Mark is the closest chronologically to the earthly ministry of Jesus; Luke is probably the furthest of the synoptic gospels, possibly written as late as the very end of the first century. Luke is unique in that it is the first book of a two-volume set, the second being the Book of Acts. Luke is a gospel written with the assumption that the Jesus movement is going to be a mostly gentile one, and that the era of the church is going to be a long one; in other words, the expectation of the imminent return of Jesus is dwindling.

We see this very clearly in the material in today's gospel lesson that is unique to Luke. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all contain a version of the apocalyptic discourse that we heard in today's gospel reading. Almost everything we find in verses 25-33 in Luke we also find in Matthew and Mark. But verses 34-36 are unique to Luke. They are a moral admonition to stay alert. Listen to them again; you won't hear them again until 2024! "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man." (Luke 21:34-36) Don't fall prey, in other words, to the pleasures and temptations and worries of this life in a way that distracts you and compromises your alertness. Live each day in a state of readiness.

The unique emphasis in Luke's version of the apocalyptic discourse is on how we live *in the present*. As Amy-Jill Singer, an Orthodox Jewish New Testament scholar who teaches at Vanderbilt, says very succinctly, "Luke's Gospel and the companion volume Acts promote not the end of the world, but the growth of the Way." (*New Cambridge Bible Commentary, The Gospel of Luke*, p. 560) Yes, God's ultimate purposes will be realized in a great consummation in which the Son of Man will come in a cloud and great glory. (21:27) But Luke intends even this as a reassurance and an encouragement for the church as it goes about its life and its ministry. In the other verse that we find only in Luke, verse 28, Jesus says, "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." (21:28)

So...a close reading of Luke's version of the apocalyptic discourse reveals very clear emphases that we will find all through the coming year as we make our way through his gospel. First, how we live in the present is God's most pressing concern, especially with respect to how we respond to the needs of the poor. Second, we have no way of predicting how long that present is going to last but have every reason to expect it to last for a long time. And thirdly, Jesus' coming in glory will be nothing but good news to those of us who have been attentive to living as God would have us live. So, Luke's gospel is truly a gospel for those whose interest is first and foremost in being the best followers of Jesus they can possibly be. And Luke's Jesus has certain specific expectations of his followers.

If we think of this Advent season as the beginning of a journey with the Gospel of Luke, we do well to remember that the Jesus we are preparing to encounter when Christmas comes, as portrayed by Luke, is a Jesus who cares especially for the poor: a Jesus first heralded by angels appearing to poor shepherds in their fields. We would do well this Advent to be paying attention to the growing disparities between rich and poor in our world. It is truly impossible to overstate the horrifying magnitude of this. Listen to just a few statistics from Oxfam International website:

- The world's richest 1% (79 million people) have more than twice as much wealth as the poorest 6.9 billion people.
- 258 million of the world's children are not allowed to go to school, and these children are disproportionately girls.
- Men own 50% more of the world's wealth than women, and the 22 richest men in the world have more wealth than all the women in Africa.

The enormity of the collective sin in which humanity lives cannot be overstated. If we are in denial about this, we are not preparing adequately for the coming of the Jesus we meet in Luke's gospel. May we be reminded of it each time we meditate before the beautiful new icon we are about to dedicate and bless. This Jesus points us to the work we have to do in the world and says, "stay faithful, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, teach your children to care about the well-being of others more than their own, show in your own Christian communities what fairness and kindness and humility really look like."

This Jesus says you won't fix all of it—or even most of it—but that is not your job. This Jesus says that to live faithfully is to do the work of love in the world and leave the outcome to God. I think our new Grace Church Mission Statement says it perfectly: *"To love God is a call to action. Strengthened by prayer, worship, and study, Grace Church embraces and serves all people, the earth, and every living thing."* It's a Gospel of Luke Mission Statement, to be sure! And again, Luke's Jesus says that if you have lived this way, then when you see him coming, "stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." (21:28)

Finally, this Jesus says that until that day when we stand up and raise our heads, we do best to look not up, or ahead, but into our own hearts, and into the eyes of those we encounter along the Way of love and service. May we find grace and strength this Advent to do just this.

Amen.