

Introducing the Luke Cycle: Advent Preaching for Year C

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The great question for preaching in Advent is haunting and, if not perpetual, the question is at least annual. That is, does the season mostly anticipate the advent of a memory or does the season mostly anticipate the advent of hope? More precisely, are we in our Advent preaching to encourage our people to prepare to look back at what God did once long, long ago or are we to encourage our people to look forward to what God shall yet surely do? The question is, of course, an easy one. The season looks in both directions and so must our preaching.

Nevertheless, working out the answer in the real church struggling to live faithfully in the real world is not all that simple. When we sit down to write our Advent offerings we will, again this year, do so with the full knowledge that our people will be near drowning in a sea of *Christmas*, not Advent, sights and sounds. The church lost that battle long ago and may even have aided and abetted the enemy. Now we're lucky if the Christmas hullabaloo cavorting about during Advent has an occasional religious motif with wise men and shepherds coming to see Baby Jesus in department store displays to the tune of a Christmas hymn being piped throughout the mall now and then tucked somewhere between "Sleigh Bells Ring" and "Chestnuts Roasting On An Open Fire." In short, with such bombardment in the direction of memory, it is not likely we can expect even our most faithful people to be much in the mood for eschatology.

With the secular sector dragging us, however voluntarily or reluctantly, down memory lane, in recent years many preachers have seen the importance of addressing the other side of the Advent equation and concentrating on the importance of hoping for what God is yet doing. Indeed, *The Revised Common Lectionary* selections for Advent push us more in the direction of hope than in the direction of memory. Year "C," the year of the Luke cycle, like Years "A" and "B," begins the year with a prediction of the second coming of Messiah: "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations..." (21:25). See also Matthew 24:36 ff. ("...about that day and hour no one knows....") for Advent One in Year "A" and Mark 13:24 ff. ("...in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened....") for the comparable Sunday in Year "B." The only help we can expect from the mall on that theme is apt to come from Cinema 12, where on at least one screen we can almost surely expect an apocalyptic offering; but help like that is apt to do more harm than good.

Following a move in the direction of apocalypse, for each year in the three-year rhythm of the Lectionary, Advent Two and Advent Three move to John the Baptist. Once again the secular sector is no help. Who ever saw a department store window display with a wild man eating locusts and honey in it? Only at Advent Four, the Sunday before Christmas, does the Lectionary move us in the direction of anticipating the memory of the Bethlehem story.

In this brief article, I am not suggesting that we cave in to pressures from Wall

Street (or even that we sing Christmas carols before Christmas Eve). Neither am I suggesting we abandon the Lectionary. I am suggesting, however, that for one year we capitalize on what is going on around us in the culture at large in such a way that it rescues Advent themes from the jaws of the marketplace. To do that I am suggesting we introduce the Luke cycle by departing briefly from the Lectionary readings and focusing on Luke 1 with readings from that chapter for both the Gospel lesson and Psalm for each Sunday in Advent. As will be seen from the chart below, reading the Gospel and Psalm separately in such a plan can be more than a little awkward and some adjustments would clearly be necessary. Nevertheless, whatever the sequence of reading, such a series could easily utilize Luke’s artful interplay of narrative and poetry in his opening chapter for both substance and form for our sermonic offerings. The goal would be to help our people experience Advent at the place where memory and hope join forces. That, I believe, is precisely what Luke did with Chapter 1 (and Chapter 2) of his Gospel.

The following schedule would enable such a plan to work:

	<u>Gospel Lesson</u>	<u>Psalm</u>	<u>Event</u>
Advent One	1:5-13; 18-25	1:14-17	Annunciation of John
Advent Two	1:26-31; 34-38	1:32-33	Annunciation of Jesus
Advent Three	1:39-41; 56	1:42-55	Mary’s visit to Elizabeth
Advent Four	1:57-66; 80	1:67-79	Birth of John

While it is far beyond the scope of this article to deal at length with textual criticism, rationale for using such a division for Advent preaching is informed by at least two such considerations. Those are (1) the dating of Luke and (2) the generally accepted notion that Luke 1 and 2 constitute a late addition to Luke’s Gospel. The former, the dating of Luke, in my view, is related to making the hermeneutical move from Jesus to Luke and from Luke to the church in the last few years of the current (or any) century. That is, approaching Luke with an assumption that it was written after, but not long after, the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE necessarily flavors one’s approach to preaching from Luke. Luke was telling the story of Jesus through the eyes of one who sees apocalypse not off in the future but all around. Though Josephus is not one of our heros, his eyewitness account of the fall of Jerusalem is telling:

Throughout the city people were dying of hunger in large numbers, and enduring indescribable suffering. In every house the merest hint of food sparked violence, and close relatives fell to blows, snatching from one another the pitiful supports of life. No respect was paid even to the dying....¹

It must be remembered that Luke, more even than all other synoptic writers, built his theology on the narrative framework of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem. Yet when Luke wrote his Gospel, Jerusalem, the city of destiny, was in ruin. Basic to Luke’s theology is that the hope of Jesus comes in the midst of utter despair in the midst of which the church was born and lives.

That being so, any sermon from Luke, especially any Advent sermon from Luke, might appropriately begin with words to the following effect:

He was standing knee-deep
in the rubble of unkept promises
when Luke finally took pen in hand
to write it all down....

From the eager anticipation of the birth of Jesus...
the birth of Jesus
and of his cousin John...
all the way to the birth of the church,
Luke saw it all
not so much through the eyes of Jesus
walking headlong into destiny;
but through the eyes of one
standing in the rubble of destiny.

Like leaving the breakfast table in tense silence,
dodging the victims of road rage,
and stepping over the homeless
huddled on the steps of the church
as we make our way to Advent worship,
our telling of the advent of hope
and hearing of the advent of hope
cannot escape...
should not escape
what our eyes have just seen.
and our hearts have just felt.

Whether or not such thoughts are specifically included in any sermon on Luke, we do well to have them tucked in our psyche as part of the flavor of Lucan preaching.

The second piece of text critical data I have raised as important for informing preaching from Luke 1 is the recognition that Luke 1 and 2 are late additions. Reaction to that widely, though not universally, accepted observation ranges from Hans Conzelmann, who very nearly ignores those two chapters in his examination of Lucan theology, to Raymond Brown, who sees those added chapters as a crucially important introduction to all of Luke's thought as viewed from the perspective of the end of Acts.² All things considered, Brown seems nearer the mark, especially from a homiletical perspective. Indeed, if Brown is right and if one follows the schedule listed above for preaching Luke 1 and returns quickly to the Lectionary listings from Luke 2 for Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and the first Sunday after Christmas, one will have very nearly used the chapters as Luke used them.

It must be quickly noted, however, that any effort to use Luke 1 (and 2) as Luke used them without also adapting Luke's artistic method, is apt to fail. Reference here is specifically to the interplay of narrative and poetic response. While it is true the narrative sections of 1 (and 2) can stand alone, the real power of the narrative is born out in the poetry woven into the narrative. The method enables the reader/hearer more to experience hope born on the wings of memory than to understand it.

The problem, of course, is that any effort to *explain* what Luke has done is far more than apt to make the narrative seem puny and the poetry nothing so much as prosaic. A better idea, as mentioned above, would be to borrow not only Luke's theology but also Luke's method. That is, while all such considerations are largely a matter of homiletical style, one might consider using a bit of contemporary narrative that parallels Luke's narrative to be followed by poetry that includes Luke's poetry. If carefully woven together, they (narrative and poetry) will allow the poetry to speak for itself and work its magic on the worshipping congregation. The following is a tentative example of how it might be done. Following the above schedule, such a sermon would be preached on the third Sunday of Advent.

MARY'S SONG

Luke 1:39-56

We're about to stand on holy ground, you know,
and we have to get ready.
We can't just let it happen
though, of course,
Christmas will happen whether we are ready or not.

It's an important thing we're about to do...
important and holy...
far more important than shopping
and much more holy.
We can't just let something so important
and so uncommonly holy
just happen.

Soon we shall pause once more
in time
and wrap ourselves in the mantle of eternity remembered.
On Christmas Eve
while standing at a particular place
we shall gaze once more
into the flesh of our finite fingers
as we close them gently about a candle...
a candle held in memory of infinity once visited.

From that posture of memory
we shall wait...
we shall wait with certainty...
certainty of that other moment
when time shall at last meet eternity once more;
and when the finite shall at last meet infinity again.

For such an event as shall happen on Christmas Eve
we cannot be unprepared.

We must make a careful plan.

Two women once made plans for Christmas.

Cousins.

One too old,

most would say,
to be expecting a baby.

The other too young,

some would say,
to be expecting a baby.

Girl talk is what they did.

Girl talk, indeed!

It was unlike any girl talk I ever imagined;

but then,
my imagination in matters of girl talk
is born of generations of too much prejudice.

They weren't girls at all.

They were women.

W-O-M-E-N...

women...

women

into whose lives the hope of the world had been entrusted.

According to the tradition of the church,

their woman talk went like this:

"Blessed are you among women,"

said the older to the younger.

"When I heard your voice the baby leaped in my womb."

As every mother knows,

and as everyone else must surely learn,
it is God who inspires
the leaping of unborn children.

At the moment of first movement,

I am given to understand,
there is no doubt among women
that the sovereign will of God is unfolding.³

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,"

replied the younger to the older.

Not like any girl talk I ever imagined,

but then, as I said before,

because of my gender,

my imagination in such matters

is clearly lacking luster.

The sovereign will of God
was unfolding in their lives.
They had to make ready.

We have to get ready too, you know.
We can't just let Christmas happen
though, of course,
Christmas will happen whether we are ready or not.

My Grandmother Lowry made quite a to-do of getting ready for Christmas. I remember going once with her to deliver a fruitcake to one of her well-to-do friends. It was in Seneca, South Carolina, where she lived and raised her children: The *Up Country* they called it. I got to go because I had helped to bake the cake. It had been my job to chop the nuts and cut the candied fruit into small pieces...a task I had to be convinced was suitable for a man-child.

As I cut and she mixed she half hummed and half sang in her clear alto voice, "Gentle Mary laid her child lowly in a manger." That was not girl talk I now know. At least it was not idle chatter. It was a remarkable lesson to be learned from a remarkable woman well versed in the pain and joy and wisdom that come from childbirth.

Anyway, when we delivered the cake to her well-to-do friend we were, of course, invited into the parlor. It was quite formal and quite fine. As previously instructed, I sat quietly and only spoke when spoken to...a lesson I have since forgotten. From the corner of my eye, however, I could see on a table the most magnificent manger scene I had yet or have yet seen. No doubt seeing me glance in its direction, at last, taking me by the hand to be sure I wouldn't touch, our hostess invited me to walk with her to look more closely. As we looked, my grandmother took my other hand as a double measure of insurance and explained that all the figures were made of finest china...so fine, in fact, that our hostess had not trusted the pieces to be packaged for shipment but had wrapped them in tissue and held them in her lap for the long trip across the Atlantic Ocean all the way from England where they had been made.

They were all in purest white. You could almost see through the angels' wings. The shepherd's crook was as fine as a thread. The swaddling clothes were paper thin and gave the appearance of wondrous softness. Mary's hands and fingers were clearly defined and nothing so much as fragile except gentle more even than fragile. "Gentle Mary laid her child...."

The lesson I learned was that something holy was happening...something so holy and precious that it could not be touched. That's a wonderful lesson to learn from two women well versed in standing reverently before that which is unspeakably holy. The unfolding of the sovereign will of God is always unspeakably holy. It cannot be touched.

In the story of getting ready for the birth of Jesus, the older woman was named Elizabeth. The name of her baby was to be John...John the Baptizer. In the story the younger woman was named Mary. The name of her baby was to be Jesus. From the very beginning, the church remembered the story of Jesus and the church told it word-

of-mouth from generation to generation. At last, however, it became important for the church to write the story so that it would never be forgotten by any generation. Several people wrote the story of Jesus. You know them: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John. There were others but those four are the ones most important to our tradition.

Of the four, only two tell the story of the birth of Jesus: Matthew and Luke. Of the two, Luke is the only one who thought to save for us the remarkable story of those two remarkable women getting ready for Christmas.

The older woman said to the younger,
 "Blessed are you (Mary,)
 because you believed
 there would be a fulfillment (in you)
 of what God promised (the world *God* would do)."

And according to the story as it has been saved for us,
 the younger woman sang to the older,
 "God has exalted those of low degree
 and scattered the proud
 in the imagination of their hearts."

By the time Luke wrote the story
 the proud had already been scattered.
Like now,
 the proud in the state;
 the proud of the market; and
 the proud in the church
 had no reason left to be proud.

This is a story about getting ready for Christmas.
We have to get ready, don't we.
We can't just let Christmas happen
 though, of course,
 the sovereign will of God *shall* unfold
 whether we are ready or not.

My Grandmother Banks made quite a to-do of getting ready for Christmas too; but getting ready for Christmas at my Grandmother Banks' house was a lot different than getting ready for Christmas at my Grandmother Lowry's house. My Grandmother Banks lived in St. Matthews, South Carolina: The *Low Country* they call it. Oh, they both baked fruitcakes and, like Tom Sawyer, they both managed to convince their various grandchildren that chopping nuts and cutting up candied fruit was a task of great honor. After that, almost nothing was the same. Their fruitcakes didn't even smell alike. You see, my Grandmother Banks had a secret ingredient which she poured over the top of the fruitcake after the cake had had a chance to cool. She got the special ingredient all the way from Kentucky where, she explained, they are especially gifted at making it. She also explained the secret ingredient was to keep the cake moist, only while she poured the secret ingredient she sang, "'Tis the season to be jolly." Not a

bad lesson to be learned...I mean the being jolly part.

The creche at my Grandmother Banks' house was different too ...not much at all like the lovely delicate one in the parlor of my Grandmother Lowry's friend. My Grandmother Banks' creche was built with children in mind. She had a great gourd almost as big as a bushel basket. My Grandfather Banks had cut a hole in the side of the gourd and painted the inside dark blue to look like the sky. He dotted the sky with stars and then he did a most remarkable thing. He installed a little electric light in the sky that could be turned on to be the Christmas Star. Best of all, they had a shoe box just filled to overflowing with a wonderful assortment of mix-and-match figures. Most of the figures were chipped and bruised and the angels' wings were bent from years of touching and pretending. For weeks before Christmas, as a way of getting ready, the gourd was kept on the floor with the box of figures beside it. Together they were an invitation for children of all ages to arrange and rearrange the figures and to tell the story to anyone who would listen; and, of course, most important of all, it was a chance for little people and big people alike to become part of the story of that remarkable birth. Touching the story and believing yourself to be part of the story are most remarkable lessons to be learned from a most remarkable woman who herself knew well the pain and the joy and the hope that come with giving birth.

What is this thing we do at Christmas?
Is it something so holy it cannot be touched;
 we can only stand quietly and pray?
Is it something so human it has to be touched and held
 lest it get away?

It is, of course,
 both of those.

Here at the heart of what we do on Christmas Eve
 we are able to stand in time
 and wrap ourselves in the mantle of eternity remembered.
Here with these finite fingers
 we are allowed for a moment to touch the memory of infinity.

It happened then
 in the birthing of a baby.
It happens now
 in the rebirthing of something in us.
It is the hope we have
 in the unfolding
 of the sovereign will of God.

"My soul *magnifies* the Lord,"
 sang Mary,
 and the church after her.

It's the way she felt

and the way we feel
at the hope of Christmas being fulfilled
in her
and in us.

As to the whereabouts of the creche of my Grandmother Lowry's friend, I can only speculate. It's so lovely I have to believe it is somewhere, telling its story of something so unspeakably holy it cannot be touched. As to the whereabouts of my Grandmother Banks' creche, there was a fire in our family home and along with everything else the creche was burned. But unknown to any of us, for a number of years every fall my father, a great grower of gourds, began saving the seeds from the largest gourd of summer. Every spring he planted the seeds, and every fall he saved the seeds from the largest gourd. It was during those years when his sons were distracted with college and graduate school and getting married.

Before too many years, though, Pappy had nurtured the growth of a gourd large enough to be set aside for its holy but altogether touchable purpose. Where my mother found the hodgepodge of figures I haven't the slightest idea but there they were on the floor at Christmas just in time for our children and their cousins to touch and pretend and learn.

The gourd now waits for yet another generation. Who knows, perhaps more than all others they will need to touch the story as they prepare for the sovereign will of God to unfold in yet another generation living in the need of hope.

Notes

¹ From *Eyewitness to History*, ed John Carley (Avon, 1987), 14

² See *The Birth of the Messiah*, Raymond Brown (Doubleday, 1979), 241 ff

³ Knowing when to give credits is not always an easy thing. Here, for example, on the one hand, this image is obvious enough for general use. On the other hand, I likely would not have thought of it if Fred Craddock had not used it in his commentary on the text in *Luke* from the Interpretation Series (John Knox Press, 1990), 29