

What Time Is It?

Preaching Advent in the Year of Luke

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The lectionary readings for Advent do not tell the Christmas story the way we would like. Rather than offer a straightforward narrative progression toward the nativity that might aid us in our preparations to celebrate Jesus' birth, the lectionary instead hopscotches around Luke's Gospel with carefree abandon. In fact, the gospel readings highlighted by the lectionary actually tell the story backwards, beginning with Jesus' predictions about the end of the age, then devoting two weeks to an adult John the Baptist, and only in the fourth week directing our attention to Mary's pregnancy and the impending birth of the savior. Advent, in short, messes with our sense of time, disrupting our preference for linear movement and offering us instead a confusing array of passages only loosely linked to the anticipated celebration of the Incarnation.

This can make constructing a coherent season of sermons a rather challenging venture, as preachers may struggle to connect such wildly divergent scenes from the story of Jesus or to explain the narrative logic of the lectionary's choices. But noting that the lectionary rarely privileges narrative coherence over theological import, the gospel selections for Advent also afford preachers an opportunity to invite hearers more deeply into not simply Luke's story about Jesus but his confession regarding the new reality Jesus creates.

To put it more bluntly, preachers in the season of Advent have the chance to disrupt the neat and orderly lives we've created—lives which normally *assume* rather than *are transformed by* the Gospel—with the claims of Christmas, claims that we have all too often limited to a few days before and after December 25th. In order to do so, we need to pay attention to Luke's sense of time and history, and even more, to the surprising ways God enters into our time and history to draw us into God's ongoing and redemptive story here and now.

Advent 1: Luke 21:25-36

Jesus' anticipation of events foreboding the consummation of history makes most of us uneasy. Not only have such apocalyptic passages spawned a whole industry of end-times predictions, but they are probably the most alien genre of literature in the Bible. Truth be told, anchored in our modernistic sense of time as a linear progression between cause-and-effect determined events contained within a mechanistic and self-enclosed universe, we find these passages not simply odd but often downright off-putting, which means that we might just take some comfort in Luke's own apparent discomfort with these same predictions. Clearly, apocalyptic themes were part of the earliest Christian tradition. They appear in Paul and surface again in all of the Synoptic Gospels. But what's interesting is what happens *within* the Synoptic tradition, particularly between the writing of Mark and Luke.

Separated by a decade or two, Luke makes some interesting moves in constructing his own "little apocalypse." In particular, whereas Mark connects the end-times events

Jesus anticipates to the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, Luke intentionally disconnects the promised end of history from the Temple's demise. Interestingly, Luke is rather vague about when Jesus will return, refusing to offer any hint of a timetable. Instead, he asserts that, just as budding fig leaves unmistakably herald the advent of summer, so also will the signs of the coming kingdom be obvious to the Christian community. The question Luke therefore addresses is not *when* these things will happen (21:7) but rather what the character of the Christian life should be in the meantime (21:34ff.).

Ever alert to Jesus' possible return, the discipleship community is admonished by Luke's Jesus to avoid being caught up in either the excessive pleasures or worries of the day. Rather, they are to be watchful, ready, prepared for action. Yet at the same time, Christians should be confident, not overly somber or deadly serious. Indeed, Jesus invites his disciples to anticipate the events Jesus describes with a modicum of eagerness, even excitement, as they signal the approach of the deliverance of the Christian community.

Christians, in short, should neither ignore nor be afraid of the end of time and Jesus' return. Indeed, the only ones who have cause for anxiety are the "world" and the "powers of heaven" (21:26). Strikingly, the Greek word for "world" that Luke employs at this point isn't the more general and typical *kosmos* but instead the more particular *oikoumene*, which refers to the political and economic realms of the world and is sometimes used to signify the Roman Empire. The coming of the Son of Man, in other words, will only threaten the powers that be, those who have abused their authority and shown no regard for the poor.

It's at just this point that preachers might invite hearers into the conversation Luke is having about the nature of time and history. For while most of our folks may give nary a thought to the coming end of the world, we all find ourselves from time to time caught up in periods of anxious waiting. Perhaps it's waiting for the diagnosis from a doctor or for the safe return of a family member from a tour of duty. Perhaps it's waiting for the economy to pick up or for a better job. Perhaps it's waiting for the acceptance (or denial) letter of the college to which we applied or for the ache caused by the loss of a loved one to pass. Whatever it is, we have each experienced not just waiting, but getting preoccupied with some future event that is utterly and completely beyond our control.

In these moments, Jesus would have us neither look anxiously ahead nor close our eyes and hope for that time to pass. Rather, Jesus directs our gaze to those around us, to those nearby, and particularly to those in need, for Jesus' presence is revealed each time we reach out to another in mercy, help, and hope.

The preacher should be careful not to suggest that the Gospel eliminates waiting and worry; rather, the message of Jesus transforms it. There are, and always will be, events looming in the future that are beyond our control. But that uncertain future does not have to dominate the present. For beyond that uncertainty of uncontrollable future events is the sure and certain hope of a future secured by Christ.

The analogy employed a half-century ago by Oscar Cullman, that Christians living between the resurrection and the eschaton are like the Allied soldiers between D-Day and V-E Day, still holds. Once the Allied forces landed successfully on Normandy, their eventual victory was ensured even though there was still fighting and loss of life to endure. But what a difference to give your strength and even your life to a cause

you know will prevail! So also with those Christians hearing this passage. Yes, there is waiting and wonder and worry that colors our lives, but the threat of these things to overwhelm us is held at bay by Christ's promise to hold onto us, stay with us, and bring us in time to glory. This promise, in turn, frees us in the present to direct our gaze to those things we can influence for the good and to those people we can help here and now, trusting that even our most meager efforts are eventually caught up into the consummation of what Jesus promises.

We do not, in short, need to save the world; Jesus will do that in good time. We can, however, do our best to make the corner of the world in which we live a safer and more humane place because we labor in the confidence that Christ is coming and that his arrival will spell release, relief, and redemption for all God's people. For this reason, even in the most daunting of times and when the fear of unforeseen events assaults us, we can "stand up and raise our heads" because we know "our redemption draws near" (21:28).

Advent 2: Luke 3:1-6

As we likely recall from a New Testament class we took in seminary, there are two Greek words we translate as "time" that denote two distinct conceptions of time and history. One is *chronos*, and it names the kind of time with which we count and track the everyday events of our lives. It is the time that is measured in minutes and seconds, hours, and days. It is the time we spend standing in lines or clocking in at work or waiting at the stoplight. It is mundane, ordinary time, and it beats on relentlessly until that time when we close our eyes and escape its dull, predictable cadence. *Chronos* is the time of history, capturing in "real time" one event after another to tell the story of the world.

But there is another kind of time at play in the imagination of the Evangelists as well, and it is captured by another word: *kairos*. This time is a royal kind of time, where all that is predictable and ordinary fades, and what emerges in its place is sheer possibility. This is God's time, and it punctures through the mundane canvas and clock of our lives at unexpected intervals to reveal a glimpse of the divine. If *chronos* is the time of history, *kairos* is the time of redemption, inviting us to imagine that there is more to this life than what we see and more to our existence than what we can measure or count.

Luke regularly contrasts these two types of time and history not simply to describe their difference or even to make us alert for those elusive moments of kairotic time. Rather, Luke sets *chronos* and *kairos* side by side in order to make the case that when one is caught up in faith in Christ, any moment in time has the possibility to mediate the saving presence of God, and all of history becomes the stage upon which God works out God's gracious and redemptive will.

Notice how at various points in the Third Gospel these two conceptions of time and history collide as Luke sets the story he weaves about seemingly ordinary women and men caught up in God's grace on the stage of world events. So, for instance, Luke tells us that John is born "in the days of King Herod of Judea" (1:5), and that Mary and Joseph set out for Bethlehem because of the census ordered by Emperor Augustus, "when Quirinius was governor of Syria" (2:1-2). In this way, Luke makes a confession of faith that the events he narrates, though apparently small on the world stage—the birth of a son to a priest and his barren wife, the fortunes of a pregnant

young woman and her fiancé—are of global significance.

So also in this reading, where Luke more or less goes off his chronological rocker and portrays the advent of the preaching career of a wild-eyed, no-account prophet against the backdrop of not one or two but *seven* figures from the political and religious world of the day. In crafting this “who’s who” list, Luke, I suspect, isn’t simply inviting us to pay attention to John’s importance but rather to hear the inherent challenge John’s person and message represent. That is, John doesn’t simply live in the time of Tiberius, Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, and Caiaphas; rather, John’s faith and testimony directly challenge their authority.

As we saw last week in Luke’s choice of the distinctly economic and political word *oikoumene* for “world” (rather than the more general *kosmos*), so again this week we sense Luke’s conviction that John’s preaching will turn those who heed his call away from the powers and principalities of the age and call into question the values and assumptions of the current world order in order to reorient them to the surprising and saving grace of the Lord.

In this move, setting John amongst the political powers of his day, Luke sets up the dramatic tension that will animate the rest of his story. John comes preaching repentance and forgiveness, and the one who follows him will do likewise, but both of them will end up dead at the hands of some of those named here. Yet their deaths, and even more Christ’s resurrection, will shake the foundations of power these seven represent and stand upon.

This assertion would not have escaped those for whom Luke writes, for by the time they hear Luke’s words, all seven of the “greats” are dead, while those who followed Jesus have persisted and even flourished. In this way, Luke isn’t simply placing the story of John and Jesus in the history of the world, but rather is reinterpreting all of time and history, including our own, in light of the preaching of John and ministry and mission of the one he foretells.

On this second Sunday in Advent, we have a similar opportunity to invite our hearers to allow God’s grace to permeate all of their lives rather than containing their expectations of God to the hope of hearing a modestly inspirational sermon on Sunday. Christ comes for all of our lives, John asserts, seeking to redeem not just our leisure time but all of time, history, and humanity. And this is no small or easy work. Perhaps this is why Luke extends the passage of Isaiah also quoted by Mark and Matthew, as the advent of the one John anticipates will not only straighten paths, but also fill valleys, bring down mountains, straighten what is crooked, and smooth that which is rough (3:5).

What this means for today’s congregation will vary, of course, by the circumstances and challenges of the community. But what remains the same is that all of us are invited into the story Luke tells, to see our lives as occasions for the in-breaking of God’s mercy and to imagine that God is not only saving us but also using us to care for those nearby even here, even now. And through what may appear to the world as small gestures made by people of little account, God continues to work, again and again interrupting and redeeming chronological history before our very eyes. Indeed, as Luke suggests, we are caught up in the telling and living of a kairotic, transformative story that dates back at least to John and stretches forward until that time when, by the grace of the one John foretells, “all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (3:6).

Advent 3: Luke 3:7-18

Over the last two weeks, we have heard the Gospel promises 1) that because Christ has secured the future, the present is free for lives of service and love and 2) that just as God stepped into and transformed the history of the world through John, so also does God continue to work through our efforts and lives. At this point, some might wonder what these world-changing, history-transforming lives of faith and discipleship look like and, perhaps more to the point, if any of us are up to it. In today's passage, really a continuation of last week's reading, Luke answers those questions in a surprising way. Once again, paying attention to Luke's reshaping of materials he borrows from his synoptic siblings will help us detect his confession.

As in Mark and Matthew, so also in Luke, John the Baptist follows a clearly outlined pattern of prophetic preaching: first comes eschatological warning, then ethical exhortation, and finally messianic expectation. (Perhaps the first-century version of the three-point sermon?) But whereas Luke's account of John's sermon follows the other two closely with regard to the warning ("judgment is near") and expectation ("messiah is coming"), his second point about ethical exhortation is markedly different, and truth be told, rather odd.

What's most peculiar about John's moral instruction is how mundane, even simplistic it is and how utterly *not* world transforming it seems, more the stuff of kindergarten than God's coming kingdom. When asked by his audience what they should do to prepare for the coming eschatological judgment, John essentially tells the general crowds to share, the tax collectors to be fair, and the soldiers not to bully.

That's it? Why doesn't he tell the tax collectors to throw off their Roman yoke and join the revolution? And why doesn't he exhort the soldiers to lives of pacifism? And why doesn't he push the crowds beyond everyday sharing to lives of greater ethical significance? Isn't that what you'd expect after the fiery warnings John just delivered with such vim and vigor? Why, then, such a tame message?

Perhaps because John – embodying a Lucan theme we've detected at several points already – wants to re-orient our vision of the life of faith and discipleship from a distant future and great deeds to the ordinary, present, and everyday needs of those around us. Faith, as it turns out, doesn't have to be heroic to be significant, and the simple activities of sharing with those in need, of being fair in our business dealings, and of using our authority to protect and serve those around us rather than advance our own cause and biases would make a tremendous difference.

Keep in mind to whom John was preaching. In this, Luke again differs from his evangelist colleagues. Rather than speaking to the Pharisees and Sadducees, Luke's John offers his ethical instruction to riffraff of his day: poor crowds capable of making little to no difference in their world, despised tax collectors working with a foreign occupying force, and mercenary soldiers famous for their penchant to extort the weak and vulnerable. And yet John does not deem these folks beneath his instruction or God's attention. Indeed, he invites them into the divine drama of God's redemption of the world by calling them to be stewards of God's goodness and mercy.

Again, at first blush John's instructions may seem too simple to be significant. But that is precisely his point: living according to faith in Christ, offering yourself to God, and aligning yourself with God's hopes and purpose for the world are not beyond our reach. Moreover, when you are tempted to think his instructions are of little significance, ask yourself whether we would live in a country where one in five

children lives below the poverty line if more of us shared, whether we would have had the mortgage crisis and economic turmoil of the previous decade if more of us had treated each other fairly, and whether we would have had a Ferguson if our police refused to treat people differently because of the color of their skin.

Caught between eschatological judgment and messianic consummation, the crowds hear John speak of a role in the coming kingdom that they can actually play. Notably, John's counsel demands neither renunciation nor asceticism, neither pilgrimage nor extravagant sacrifice. At the same time, it also requires those listening to give over all they have and are to God. When they do so, they recognize that participating in God's new kingdom is available to them precisely—and I would suggest *only*—where they are. It is, in short, entirely within their reach and available to them anytime, anywhere.

So what is the character of the Christian life? Offering yourself in small ways and large to those in need nearby. Where is the arena in which to live out our faith? Wherever you find yourself. And when is the best time to do so? Right now. John's ethical instruction may be neither heroic nor herculean, but it is something the crowds listening can do. It is something, when you think about it, that anyone can do. Which means that it is something we can do, too, and when we do, God once again enters into our time and history and redeems the present moment of our lives.

Advent 4: Luke 1:39-55

The last ten verses of the lection for the Fourth Sunday in Advent are optional, but given that this passage is the only one of the four that connects directly with the coming Christmas celebration later this week, I'd heartily encourage preachers to read them all! More seriously, and more importantly, I'd invite reading through the whole of Mary's song of praise because it reveals a key element of the life of faith.

Actually, several elements. First, and characteristic of Luke's story, God chooses to act not only *among* but also *through* those the world deems of little account. Let's not fool ourselves, whatever our piety about Mary, she is according to Luke a poor young girl who finds herself pregnant out of wedlock and facing likely public scorn and possible death. Nor is her cousin much more: an old and barren (which also means shamed) woman best known for being the disappointing wife of the local priest. The idea that these two women might influence world history is, in a word, unthinkable.

Second, they end up playing such a dramatic role in God's salvation history not because of who they are or what they do, but by being open to the surprising will of God. Elizabeth, unlike her husband, does not doubt God's promise to bear a child but believes and thereby receives God's promise and gift. And Mary, though terrified by the words of the angel and the likely consequences it implies, nevertheless opens herself to the work of God in and through her body and life.

Third, when these two women gather to share the wonder of God's work through them, they neither preach nor teach nor study nor debate. They sing. And on this particular Sunday, this may be most important element of Luke's story and the Christian life to note.

The first chapters of Luke's story are simply infused with song. After Mary, Zechariah will take the stage to praise God's fidelity to Israel through the birth of John the Baptist, the angels will offer their canticle of peace and good will at the birth of

Jesus, and Simeon will croon of God's mercy being extended to all the world. Why so much verse? Because Luke understands, as did the Psalmists of Israel before him, that songs are powerful. Laments express our grief and fear so as to honor these deep and difficult emotions and simultaneously strip them of their power to dominate us. Songs of praise and thanksgiving unite us with the One to whom we lift our voices. And canticles of courage and promise not only name our hopes but also contribute to bringing them into being.

Songs are powerful; this one, especially so. Notice that the verbs in Mary's song are in the past (aorist) tense. Mary recognizes that she has been drawn into relationship with the God of Israel, the one who has been siding with the oppressed and downtrodden since the days of Egypt and who has been making and keeping promises since the time of Abraham. The past tense in this case—this is the force of aorist verbs—does not signify that what Mary sings of has already been accomplished, but rather describes God's characteristic activity and acknowledges that Mary is now included in God's history of redemption.

Songs are powerful. But despite the prominent role singing played in the Civil Rights campaign and so many other movements for greater freedom and equality, we often forget their potency. I was reminded of the power of song when I visited Eastern Germany a few years after the fall of the Berlin wall. In addition to spending time in Berlin, the group with whom I travelled also had a chance to meet with leaders of the resistance in Leipzig. Many have overlooked this part of the story, but for several months prior to the fall of the wall in Berlin, peaceful protests were held by the citizens of Leipzig. Gathering on Monday evenings by candlelight around St. Nikolai church, the church where Bach composed so many of his cantatas, they would sing, and over two months their numbers grew from a little more than a thousand people to more than three hundred thousand, over half the citizens of the city, singing songs of hope and protest and justice until their song shook the powers of their nation and changed the world. One of our hosts told me that after the fall of the wall, one of the pastors leading the resistance asked a former Stasi (secret police) commander why they hadn't crushed this protest movement as they had so many others. His answer: they had no contingency plan for song and prayer.

Songs are powerful, as they join us to those around us, connect us with a mission and purpose larger than ourselves, and infuse us with the courage of the divine. And so after preaching for several weeks on God's promise to enter into our history and make use of our gifts and encourage us to simple acts of mercy that have implications far beyond our imagination, perhaps this week we might keep the sermon brief and then give ourselves over to the songs of the season. Who knows, singing "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" may encourage us to hang in there with each other when the news seems to portray God's beloved world as dark and lonely. Or singing "The Canticle of the Turning" may stir up our courage to stand up for justice and equality. Or leaning into a Christmas song like "Joy to the World" may just embolden us to invite a friend to Christmas services and draw someone closer to the light of Christ.

I realize as I write this commentary that a few voices drawn together in song in late December may seem a small thing in the face of the wars and worries of the age, but surely no smaller than those voices joined in Leipzig...or in Selma...or in the Judean hill country so many centuries ago. Mary's God, we should remember, delights in taking what is small and insignificant in the eyes of the world to do ex-

traordinary and unexpected things in the present moment. So it has been, is, and ever shall be “according to the promise God made to our ancestors, to Abraham, and to his descendants forever.”

Yes, Advent messes with our sense of time, re-arranging the familiar events of Jesus’ life to tell the Christmas story backwards. But for those who listen, it also asks us to pay attention to God’s continued pattern of entering into our time and history to draw God’s people into the embrace of God’s incarnational love. And so to the question Advent raises, “What time is it?” these passages offer an unequivocal answer: “The time is now!” This answer in turn transforms the waiting and preparation of the season from a potentially static experience to an active, even dynamic anticipation of God’s advent by inviting us to participate in the coming reign of God here and now with those around us in the present moment.