

The Incarnation of the Son of God

Advent Readings from the Gospel of Luke

David B. Brown

Dedication

The Incarnation of the Son of God was prepared for the people of God gathered in faith communities in the Midwest Presbytery. Their pastors and ruling elders are dear to me and I send this with the prayers that God will sustain them through this difficult season marked by disease and dissent, government directed closings and social distancing.

May the families in these church communities feed their children on the Word of God and ponder these devotions as a discipline for growing godly offspring.

In as much as the story of the incarnation includes a narrative of Jesus as a twelve-year-old, and I have four 12-year-old granddaughters, I would like to recognize them as well. Here's to you, Eliana, Ana Victoria, Delilah and Evangeline. May you all grow up godly as Jesus did. May you grow up physically mentally, spiritually and socially so that it may be said of you. You increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man.

Resources I have found helpful

The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 8, Luke by Walter Liefeld

Luke, the Gospel of Amazement, by Michael Card

The Gospel According to St. Luke, by Leon Morris

The Message of Luke, Michael Wilcock

The Reformation Study Bible - English Standard Version

November 29, 2020

An Orderly Account

Luke 1:1-4

Is there a way to approach a story that is familiar to everyone and that has been written about by several before us? Our author Luke says that “many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us.” What will he add?

He will review the accounts of eyewitnesses and ministers of the word. He will add to this his own research and compile it all in an orderly way. He will present this to Theophilus, a person of rank who is either his benefactor, or a friend with whom he seeks to share the good news of peace through Jesus Christ. He wants Theophilus to have certainty concerning the things he’s been taught.

The things taught in the Gospel of Luke follow the outline presented by Peter in his meeting with Cornelius in Caesarea. (Acts 10:34-43) John the Baptist will be presented first. Next, he will highlight God’s anointing of Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit. Luke will record the good deeds of Jesus who healed the oppressed. He will include stories from the Jewish country side and from the city of Jerusalem. His account will focus upon the death of Jesus, his resurrection and the appearances that provided the certainty that this gospel really was true.

Advent is an ideal time to return to this familiar story with an eye toward solidifying our grasp of the things Jesus accomplished. Let’s join Theophilus and get underway.

Closing Prayer: Dear Lord, your word has been delivered to us in four gospels. We want to gain certainty about the things we have been taught. Help us to get beyond random thoughts and put the message into an orderly account. Amen.

November 30, 2020 Which Promise Remains? Luke 1:5-25

Old age is a time for sorting out the events of life. Which of our hopes and dreams have been fulfilled? Which have faded away? Which are now impossible to believe?

Zechariah's prayer that he might produce offspring with Elizabeth had faded away. Yet, the honor of entering the temple of the Lord to burn incense was now being fulfilled. A righteous old man could be satisfied with life even though not all hopes would be realized.

But wait! In the midst of the fulfillment of his solemn duty in the Temple, an angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah and said: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you shall call his name John." The son's role in the story of salvation along with the power by which he would accomplish his mission were spelled out clearly by the angel.

Zechariah could not believe this. But in due time, Elizabeth conceived, quietly made it through the first two trimesters and then spoke up: "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me to take away my reproach among people." The only one who was not yet filled with joy and gladness was Zechariah, who would not speak until the promise was fulfilled.

Hang in there Zechariah, and all you who have written off the promises of God. As Gabriel stands in the presence of God, you can be assured that the remaining promises of God will be fulfilled.

Closing Prayer: Lord, I believe; help by unbelief. Forgive my discouragement-based dismissals of prayers I have placed before you and promises made by you in return. Amen

December 1, 2020

The Annunciation

Luke 1:26-38

The intersection between heaven and earth is clearly portrayed in this story. Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, is sent on his second Advent errand. He comes from God's throne to meet Mary in Galilee.

"Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you" says Gabriel to a young virgin named Mary. An astounding message follows:

Firstly, that Mary was and would be a recipient of the grace of God;

Secondly, that she would conceive in her womb and bear a son though she would remain a virgin;

Thirdly, that her son Jesus will be great and be called the Son of the Most High, and that he would be given the throne of his father David and reign over the house of Jacob in a kingdom that will never end;

Fourthly, that this conception and birth will take place by the agency of the Holy Spirit and the overshadowing power of the Most High.

Unlike Zechariah, who resisted Gabriel's announcement, Mary, though troubled by the announcement, gave no resistance to the divine message. "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word."

What could possibly have caused Mary to respond so positively? We are given a few hints which might strengthen us as we participate at the intersection of Heaven and earth.

She believed that she was a recipient of God's grace. She accepted the assurance given by the angel to overcome her fear. She believed the evidence of ancient Scripture and current events: "For nothing will be impossible with God."

Closing Prayer: Dear Lord, as we stand at the intersection between heaven and earth, help us to believe the message of your grace and favor. Enable us to overcome our fear and to accept the truth set before us in Scripture that nothing will be impossible with God. Amen

December 2, 2020

Blessed are you

Luke 1:39-45

Friendships among women tend to go very deep. Never is this more clearly seen than during the time of shared pregnancies.

Baby showers are given in anticipation of the coming of a firstborn child; meal schedules are arranged for the first weeks (months?) after the arrival. When the babies are presented in public, the women pass the babies around the circle of women friends.

While we cannot prove the origin of these customs, we can cite the example of Mary and Elizabeth's friendship, should any husbands wonder about all the fuss their spouses are making.

Mary hurried to the hill country of Galilee and entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. Elizabeth in her turn extended a greeting to Mary. But it was much more than a "hi, how are you?" Elizabeth spoke as one who was filled with the Holy Spirit to a woman whose pregnancy was the work of the Holy Spirit. As her offspring leaped for joy in the womb, Elizabeth spoke a blessing of enormous importance.

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

Humble reverence and glorious joy connected these two women. For Elizabeth acknowledged Mary as the mother of her Lord. Yes, Mary's child was her Lord!

Closing Prayer: Dear God, two women have entered into the blessing of the incarnation in the midst of their pregnancies. May their joy overflow into our lives as we are brought to a place where we may behold your son whom Mary brought to incarnate life. Amen

December 3, 2020 My Soul Magnifies the Lord Luke 1:46-56

Elizabeth's blessing of Mary led to Mary's song. And what a song it is!

"My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant."

The song is saturated with Scripture. Bible scholars observe that at least twelve Old Testament passages are referenced in this song, beginning with the song of Hannah from 1 Samuel 2:1-10.

The song focuses upon the attributes of God. He is mighty; He is holy and He is merciful. Knowing God for who he is provides a deep anchor for all true worship. Mary is both reverent toward God and knowledgeable of Scripture.

The song "strikes a revolutionary note." In the coming of the Savior, the old order has been overturned. (Mary speaks of this as an accomplished fact, though the baby is still in her womb). Michael Wilcock shows the power of Mary's words by citing the Archbishop's warning to the rector in India during the last days of British India. "Do not include the Magnificat in your services; it is a most revolutionary canticle."

Finally, the song focuses on the mercy of God. This "aspect of God's character [is] sometimes overlooked when his power and holiness are stressed." (Liefeld) But Mary knew the truth found in the book of Lamentations. "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." (Lam 3:22)

What song are you singing as you consider the advent of our Lord? Does it magnify the Lord? Is it saturated in Scripture? Does it declare the truth of God's character? Does it embrace God's sovereign plan to overturn the old order of pride and power politics that opposes Him?

Closing Prayer: Lord, you have had mercy on your servants by sending your son. He is the fulfillment of promises made to Abraham and his descendants forever. We rejoice in your mercy fulfilled in Messiah.

Amen

December 4, 2020

The Grand Theme Stated

Luke 1:57-80

The idea that Zechariah would be the one to state the grand theme of the gospel seems far-fetched. Wasn't he the one who disbelieved Gabriel, the messenger who stands in the presence of God? Wasn't he the one who was silenced for nine months? Yet here he is at his son's circumcision ceremony writing on a tablet and then bursting into song.

The theme of the song is the hope of salvation. This would eventually include salvation from political enemies. But the first focus of his song pertains to the spiritual foes who keep people in bondage to sin. Forgiveness of sins is at the heart of the message of salvation.

Michael Wilcock puts it this way: "That is where the revolution has to begin. Before there can be a right relationship between man and man, there must be a right relationship between man and God, and the sin that spoils that must be repented of and removed." (Wilcock:38)

We gain the hope of salvation by looking back to the God who made a covenant with Abraham. This is the anchor of our hope. God never breaks his covenant. We may look back to his oath and be assured that salvation is coming.

Secondly, we gain hope by dwelling on the mercy of God. This, too, has a history; but Zechariah focuses on Jesus who brings the tender mercy of our God at this moment in time. He is the sunrise who visits us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Finally, we gain hope of salvation by looking to the agent of salvation. John is the prophet of the Most High. He goes before the Lord to prepare his way and to give knowledge of salvation to the people living in darkness through the forgiveness of their sins.

Closing Prayer: O Lord, open our closed mouths, loosen our lips to declare that Jesus Christ is the horn of salvation and that forgiveness of sins is the way to find the hope of the covenant applied us. Amen

December 5, 2020

Birth in a Manger

Luke 2:1-7

What seemed a mere political necessity demanded by Caesar Augustus proved to be an incidence of the providence of God. Joseph and Mary were summoned by the governor of Syria to be registered in Bethlehem, Joseph's ancestral home, as Mary's pregnancy was coming full term.

They packed up whatever they could for the journey and headed south. No doubt their relatives would welcome them and make room for them in their homes. Failing that, they would find a place in an inn.

While they were in Bethlehem the time came for Mary to give birth. Sadly, their plans fell apart. Perhaps there were more relatives than anyone could have imagined and the homes really were filled to overflowing. Or perhaps the story is true, that the relatives looked on this couple with a judgmental eye and refused them shelter.

Counter explanations were of no use. So, at a certain point the two realized that a stable would have to be found and a manger would have to do as a birthing place. Soon Mary gave birth to her firstborn son, wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger.

How people react to disappointments makes a great difference for their future. Mary and Joseph could have brooded over the injustice of Rome, the ignorant moralism of their relatives and the lack of hospitality of those around them. Instead, they made the necessary adjustments and then focused on their immediate family.

Here was their child of promise immaculately conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of a virgin, and prepared for the central role in salvation's history. Here was a virtuous man who would support and defend his betrothed and care for his adopted son. God was on the move to bless them and through them to bless the world. For them that was enough.

Closing Prayer: Lord, enable us to perceive your providential care in our midst. Make us willing to accept what seems like "Plan B;" and make us a holy family that builds our life together, believing that you intend to bless the world through us. In the name of your Son, our Savior. Amen.

December 6, 2020 Good News for Shepherds Luke 2:8-14

Downward mobility is a main theme of the Incarnation. The Apostle Paul writes of it in Philippians 2:6-8 where he describes Christ as one “who did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking on the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.”

Joseph and Mary were already poor when they arrived in Bethlehem. When he was born, their newborn shared their low estate. The personal downward mobility continued beyond the birth in the stable when their first “house guests” showed up.

Michael Card sets the scene for us. “As poor and outcast as Joseph and Mary and the newborn seem to be, there is a group in the country more outcast still. That would be the shepherds.” (Card:48) Though they prepared spotless lambs for Passover sacrifices, they were not spotless themselves. They were considered to be thieves; they were deemed unreliable witnesses, and they were prohibited from participating in Jewish religious celebrations.

But that’s not the end of the story. In the midst of the darkness an angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds and the glory of the Lord shown around them. “Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

Three hundred years later, the church father Athanasius explained what this meant. “He (Christ) became what we are so that he might make us what he is.” Jesus continued the downward mobility to the point of death, even to death on the cross.

As for the shepherds, the scriptures declare that when anyone embraces Christ they are transferred from death to life, from slave to free, from sinner to saint. I expect to see many shepherds in heaven invited there by myriad of angels who sang glory to God and peace among those with whom God is pleased. It is the ultimate reversal, the true meaning of upward mobility.

Closing Prayer: Dear Lord, we acknowledge the downward journey of the son of God. He emptied himself to the point of death so that we might be filled with his eternal life. We praise you our Savior. Amen

December 7, 2020

Examined and Pondered

Luke 2:15-20

The ancient philosopher Plato is credited with the phrase, "An unexamined life is not worth living." The shepherds may have been living a rather meaningless life until they were visited by the angels. Fortunately, they did something in response to the visitation.

Here is their decision: "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us."

This willingness to respond to God's revelation is the beginning of life's transformation. Yet, for many, the willingness to examine Scriptures, signs and wonders from God is lacking among many. Why is that?

Have we pre-determined that God would not be willing or able to do anything with us in light of our past? Have we settled for an existence that is little more than dead men walking? Have we excused our lack of curiosity on the busyness of our lives and the immediate responsibilities we are trying to manage? Have we accepted the common chorus that says there is no communication from God, or no God to communicate?

Here's the good news. People as common as shepherds who are willing to make haste to the manger will behold the Savior of the world and will obtain a life of praise and glory that will impact the world.

After Mary received the shepherds and showed them the Christ child lying in the manger, she went deeper within. "Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart."

Is your life an examined life? Have you gone beyond the externals to see what the Lord is communicating to you about life as he planned it to be? Once you have connected with him, have you gone deeper with God?

Closing Prayer: Lord make us like the shepherds of Bethlehem who responded to the revelation of your glory in heaven and good news for people on earth. Make us like Mary who treasures and ponders what you have done in the sending of your Son. Amen.

December 8

Three Ceremonies

Luke 2:21-24

In the best sense of the word, a religious life is a life of devotion to God shown in response to the grace of God. Mary and Joseph completed three ceremonies common to their religious heritage.

They circumcised Jesus on the eighth day of his life. This signified their commitment to bring him into the Covenant community that had roots going back to Abraham. He was given the name Jesus at that moment, and with it was given his identity since Jesus means God saves.

On the fortieth day after Jesus' birth Mary came for their purification in Jerusalem according to the Law of Moses. This ceremony signified Mary's recovery from the loss of blood after bearing a child. The couple was so poor that the sacrifice of a lamb was waived in favor of a pair of turtle doves or two pigeons. Nonetheless, they made an offering.

Closely related to this, Jesus was dedicated to the Lord on that day. As the firstborn, he belonged to the Lord. His life was not his own. He was set apart for a holy life.

The three ceremonies were more than mere rituals in the fulfillment of Jewish traditions. They were indications that the family was committed to the Law of God. To skip such ceremonies would be to declare one's rebellion against God and his promises. That would be a perilous choice. The uncircumcised would be cut off from God's people; the unpurified would be left to die unclean; and the firstborn who was not dedicated to the Lord would be lost with the first born of Egypt.

Because of their faithfulness to the biblical requirements, the Apostle Paul could proclaim the progress of redemption. "But when the fulness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of the woman, born under law, to redeem those who were under law so that we might receive adoption as sons." (Gal. 4:4-5)

Closing Prayer: Lord God, we wish to show our devotion to you by responding to your grace in a manner which pleases you. We intentionally choose to move away from rebellion and independence for we desire to be found in you, the true source of eternal life. Amen

December 9, 2020 The One We've Waited For! Luke 2:25-38

Nobody likes to wait anymore. And why should we? With the advancing speeds of technology, we've fallen for the lie that anything worth having is worth having right now. Because of this mindset, waiting to be tested, waiting to vote, waiting for justice, waiting to come out of pandemic protocols, waiting for a vaccine is driving people nuts.

In reality, waiting is part of life and part of God's plan for us. Simeon understood this and accepted it. Anna lived the waiting game until she was eighty-four years old. Did it prove to be a beneficial way of life?

Consider the testimony of Simeon. Luke's record states that "this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him." That same Holy Spirit revealed to him that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

The waiting ended when he came in the Spirit into the temple and laid his eyes on Jesus who was in his parents' arms. The couple was kind enough to let Simeon hold the baby. As he took Jesus in his arms, he blessed God and said:

Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word,
for my eyes have seen your salvation, that you have prepared in
the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for the glory to your
people Israel.

As for Anna, the widow who lived a lifetime of waiting, she celebrated the end of waiting by giving thanks to God and speaking of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Do you have the courage to wait for what you do not have, and to believe in the promise of God until you see the Savior, Jesus Christ?

Closing Prayer, Dear Lord, like Simeon and Anna, we sing the Psalm of hope today. "For God alone my soul waits in silence, from him comes my salvation. He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress. I shall not be greatly shaken." We are looking forward to the day when our waiting is resolved. Maranatha. Come Lord Jesus. Amen

Nearly identical comments bracket the last section of the birth story. It is the sum total of the description of Jesus' childhood. Listen carefully all you parents of "terrible twos," "tweeners" and growing adolescents!

"And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom.
And the favor of God was upon him." Luke 2:40

"And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor
with God and man." Luke 2:52

Physical, mental, spiritual and social growth are encompassed in these few words. Do you have a plan for raising your children that includes these dimensions?

Physical goals are the easiest to comprehend. Jesus journeyed to Egypt after the visit of the wisemen. He might have been learning to walk by that time. Two years later the young boy strengthened his legs and heart and lungs by walking alongside his parents on the long road back to Judea and Galilee. (See Mt 2:13-23)

Mental growth came from listening to conversations shared with those around him. What did Jesus hear? As godly Jews, Mary and Joseph were well-versed in the Torah and their purpose would have been to raise a child of the Torah toward the goal of his Bar Mitzvah at age 12.

Closely related and flowing out of Torah studies would be spiritual growth – growth in wisdom. When the Old Testament is the curriculum, all kinds of spiritual lessons emerge. Imagine the time Jesus spent listening to the stories of the patriarchs, the judges, the kings of Israel. Think of how he was prepared for his calling by learning the Psalms of David, the wisdom of Solomon and the words of the prophets. Spiritual wisdom comes by hearing and heeding the word of God.

Finally, Jesus grew in favor with God and man. That is the social side of growing up godly. Interaction with his heavenly Father and with his earthly parents and his neighbors made him a well-rounded and mature person who was able to listen to the leaders in Jerusalem, question them and speak to them while sitting in his Father's house.

Closing Prayer, Dear Lord, Bless the families who are raising children. Give them a sense of your purpose so that their children grow up godly. Amen.

December 11, 2020 Prepare the Way

Luke 3:1-20

The good news of salvation is not just a Christmas story told by angels to shepherds in their fields. It is the theme of the ages which was about to be fulfilled in the coming of age of two towering figures: John and Jesus. John will prepare the way; but Jesus will bring salvation. Luke makes this distinction between the two persons clear by focusing first upon John.

First of all, John's ministry was time bound. It started "in the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar – when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea and Herod was tetrarch in Galilee... during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas." It ended when that same Herod locked John up in prison.

Secondly, while John's ministry got people ready to see God's salvation, it did not bring it to pass. John called people to a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, but that alone did not save anyone;

Neither would his insistence to produce fruit in keeping with repentance save the leaders and the crowd that gathered before him to hear his word. Sharing an extra tunic, restricting one's income to required amounts, ending extortion and learning contentment were all noble changes, but none in themselves would bring salvation.

Finally, like all true prophets, John called attention away from himself to the Lord. God's salvation would come through "one more powerful than I" said John. "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." He will "gather the wheat into the barn but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Closing Prayer, Dear Lord, we rightfully acknowledge the role that John played in your plan. He called attention to you and challenged everyone he met to get ready to see God's salvation. He called us to that radical return to the Lord, the One who alone can change our lives. Now Lord bring us your Spirit and your fire. Change us we pray. Amen

December 12, 2020

The Baptism of Jesus

Luke 3:21-22

Luke's approach to the baptism of Jesus is rich in meaning though sparse in details. Few of the details provided in Matthew's Gospel are included. There is no mention that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee; no mention of the Jordan River; no record of the resistance by John to baptize Jesus; no mention of John; no declaration by Jesus that it was fitting that he would be baptized to fulfill all righteousness. What's left?

First of all, Luke emphasizes that Jesus had been baptized like all the people. Morris writes of the significance of this. "Clearly He decided to take his place with them. At the outset of His ministry He publicly identified Himself with the sinners He came to save." (Morris:99) This is the glory of the incarnation of Christ. God is with us and God is for us!

Secondly, Luke mentions that when he was praying the heavens were opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. The inauguration of the age of the Spirit was at hand. The Spirit would rest and remain upon Jesus (John 1:32-33) and in due time he would baptize with the Holy Spirit those who devoted themselves to him in prayer. (Acts 2:1-4)

Thirdly, Luke emphasizes that "a voice came from heaven, 'you are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased.'" Here is the identity of Jesus declared from heaven for the first time: He is the Son of God and the Servant of the Lord 'on whom God's plan for the salvation of mankind is centered.' (Tasker in TNTC) Michael Card reflects on this and writes: "They are the words that every son longs to hear from his father, but only a few ever do...Those words will help prepare Jesus for the wilderness he is about to endure. For the next three years of struggle, rejection and opposition they will echo in his ears when he is most tempted to give up." (Card:61)

Closing Prayer: Dear Lord, we remember your baptism as the moment it became clear that you were willing to identify with us sinners so that we might one day enter into the life in the Spirit and bear the image of God as your Son did on earth. Be pleased to establish our identity in Him. Amen.

December 13, 2020 Tracing Jesus' Genealogy Luke 3:23-38

Tracing Jesus' genealogy is no easy task. Firstly, Luke tells us he was the son (as was supposed) of Joseph. Perhaps it was the only way Luke could explain Joseph's presence in light of the virgin birth. No DNA was available; nor would it have validated Joseph as father. Nonetheless, Joseph stepped up to his betrothal vows and acted as Jesus' father.

Secondly, Luke's genealogy differs from that posted in the Gospel of Matthew. Luke's genealogy may follow Mary's lineage while Matthew follows Joseph's lineage. There is a slight divergence along the way, but both Mary and Joseph are from the tribe of Judah and their ancestry meets at the generation of David. A promise of an unending kingship made to David thus remains intact for 22 generations.

But that's not the end. Luke follows this genealogy back past Abraham all the way back to Adam. Jesus is the son of Adam. He identifies with the whole human race. The Apostle Paul will later call him "the second Adam," and will show the significance of Jesus' sinless life by saying, "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." "The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit." Because of the death and resurrection of Christ, "we shall bear the image of the man of heaven." (I Corinthians 15:22, 45, 49)

The final name in the lineage of Jesus is the son of God. This will be the continuing message of the Gospel of Luke. In Jesus we meet the Son of God. By this statement, Luke's gospel coordinates with the message of the prologue of the Gospel of John. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." When "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, we beheld the glory of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:1, 14)

Closing Prayer: Dear Lord, when we see the line of Jesus, we behold not just a person with a long lineage, not just a king, but the very Son of God who came in flesh to save the human race. We exalt the Son of God who comes as the life-giving spirit. Amen.

December 14, 2020 The Temptations of Jesus Luke 4:1-13

The writer of Hebrews presents Jesus as the great high priest who has passed through the heavens. What qualified him for that office? He is “one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” (Hebrews 4:14-15)

He was tempted to satisfy his bodily hunger by turning stones into bread. The temptation was real, for Jesus had been in the wilderness for forty days and ate nothing during those days. So he was hungry. But Jesus did not waver. He would depend on God, obey His Word and wait on the Spirit who led him into the wilderness for this season.

Jesus was tempted to grasp universal power over the kingdoms of the world as delivered by the prince of this world. It was a challenge to the counsel of God which was made before the foundation of the world to save the human race by means of the lamb slain, the son crucified on a cross. Jesus was fully devoted to the Lord his God and refused to bow down to the schemes of the world’s wrongful prince.

Thirdly, Jesus was tempted to misappropriate Scriptures and so to put God in the awkward place of performing on the Son’s terms. Jesus delighted in God and refused to yield to this form of manipulation.

Because of Jesus’ dependence, devotion and delight in God the Father, he weathered the storm of temptation in the wilderness. He will face more onslaughts in the future culminating at the cross. But this contest sets him apart from the children of Israel who yielded to temptation so often in the wilderness. This sets him up as the perfect high priest who can sympathize with us in our weakness. This sets him before us as the merciful and gracious one who can help us in our time of need.

Closing Prayer: Dear Father, we are looking unto Jesus our great high priest. He’s the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. We are devoted to the Father on the throne and to the Lamb of God, our Savior. Amen

December 15, 2020 Fulfillment and Rejection Luke 4:14-30

Jesus' ministry in Galilee is introduced in summary form in Luke 4:14-15.

“Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues and everyone praised him.”

We will hear many stories of this ministry in the following chapters, but for starters, Luke chooses to focus on Jesus' return to Nazareth.

There on a sabbath he entered the synagogue where he had been brought up. When the scroll of Isaiah was handed him, he followed the local custom and, unrolling the scroll, he found the words we identify as Isaiah 61:1-2.

The words are clear. It is talking about one upon whom the Spirit of the Lord dwelt. That was Jesus' self-understanding. After reading the text he sat down and proclaimed to a community of people whose eyes were fastened upon him the astounding message of liberation for the poor, the prisoners, the blind and the oppressed. He wrapped it all up by saying: “Today the Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” (Lk 4:21)

Everyone considered this a successful first sermon until they stopped to ask themselves a few questions: Isn't this Joseph's son? Isn't he going to do some healing here as we heard he did in Capernaum? Isn't he for the Jews rather than for the foreigners who live among us?

Without certain proof in their midst, the crowds of admirers turned into a band of thugs who escorted Jesus to the edge of the cliff at the outskirts of the city where they intended to dispose of him for good.

While Jesus did not turn his wrath against these hometown skeptics, neither did he do any miracles in their midst nor even return to Nazareth after this. There's a sobering message here: Sooner or later a last opportunity comes and goes and those who refuse Messiah never receive the liberation he offers.

Closing Prayer: Dear Savior, I believe the word you read is true and I receive the freedom and recovery you have come to offer. I thank you for the favor extended to me by your presence in my life. Amen

December 16, 2020

The Authoritative Lord

Luke 4:31-44

Charles Wesley's hymn, entitled "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing" contains a fourth verse that focuses on the healing ministry of Jesus.

"He breaks the power of canceled sin, he sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the foulest clean, his blood availed for me."

The song could have been sung by many in Galilee who were touched by the Spirit-powered Savior. Two instances are called to our attention in the last verses of Luke chapter 4.

First of all, Jesus rebuked a demon within a human being so that the evil spirit was forced to depart. By doing this he proved himself to be the liberating force for those oppressed as prophesied in Isaiah 61:1-2. Then he rebuked the fever with which Simon's mother in law suffered.

The effect of Jesus' ministry was amazement at Jesus' authority in the first instance, and a household gathering where a multiplication of healings and liberations took place. These representative acts illustrate what Peter later summarized in Acts 10:38. Jesus went about doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil.

But that was not to be the sum total of the Messiah's ministry. The closing verses show Jesus alone in a desolate place praying about his next steps. When the disciples caught up to him and begged him to return to Capernaum, he announces the next steps in his itinerary. "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose." Little did they know that they were about to be enlisted to join him in that endeavor.

Closing Prayer: We are among the thousand tongues who sing our great Redeemer's praise. We celebrate the glories of our God and King, the triumph of his grace. Amen

December 17, 2020 Boats For Sale!

Luke 5:1-11

The stories of boat purchases and sales include lots of witty sayings. “The two happiest days in a man’s life – the day he buys his boat and the day he sells his boat.” “A boat is a hole in the water in which you pour money.” My boat is just two feet short of happiness.”

In Luke’s gospel the focus is on two boats owned by fishermen. Chances are they didn’t have any of the sex appeal of modern yachts. But they were useful as they enabled some men to make a living. That is, until Jesus visited these men on the shore of Lake Gennesaret. (Galilee)

First of all, Jesus asked the fishermen to let him use their boat so that he could teach the people from the boat. Nothing risky here. They were not using them at the time since they were done fishing for the night and were busy washing their nets. We should make our stuff available to the Lord.

Secondly, Jesus asked the fishermen to go back to sea to catch some fish. This was a more than a bit disturbing. Simon therefore pushed back before accepting this “Captain’s orders.” What does he know about fishing? What does he know about last night’s failure and this morning’s exhaustion? When has he ever cleaned nets after a frustrating night of work?

That morning they found their Captain, a Master who could fill their boats to overflowing. How would they respond? Simon Peter fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man.”

But Jesus hadn’t come to destroy or humiliate them. Instead he had come to call them to join him in his mission to men. The encounter led to one more witty saying about boats:

“Boats for sale; you’ll find them beached on the shores of the lake. We have left everything to follow Jesus.” Would you put that sign up at your beach house?

Closing Prayer: Lord, move us along from fishermen to fishers of men. Take us through whatever process you deem best. Use our boats, fill our boats, beach our boats. We want to follow you. Amen

December 18, 2020 Ready, Willing and Able! Luke 5:12-32

The fulfillment of the call spelled out in Nazareth continues in this section where Luke demonstrates Jesus to be ready, willing and able to bestow the favor of the Lord on those who come to him.

A man with leprosy was certainly no candidate for healing. He was part of the original “socially distanced” class. Lepers were to stay invisible, out of sight, and if by chance they came anywhere near to others, were required to announce their uncleanness so that others would avoid them.

This leper broke the rules, but in the most contrite way. When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, ‘Lord, if you are willing you can make me clean.’”

To his surprise, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing, be clean.” With that, the leprosy left him.

The only thing left was to “go show yourself to the priest and make an offering for your cleansing as Moses commanded, for a proof to them.”

It is central to the gospel of Jesus Christ that he is willing to meet us in our worst condition and grant to us his best solution. With this truth in mind, may I ask you: Have you ever risked everything by approaching the Lord with your greatest need? If so, how has the Lord shown his favor to you? And how have you borne testimony to his grace in your life?

Closing Prayer: Dear Lord, your willingness to make this man clean encourages me to believe that you are willing to do the same in our 21st century world where people are desperately avoiding contact with others and masking up lest everyone succumbs to a virus that we do not fully understand. Please show us the favorable year of the Lord by stepping in with your more-than-willing solution. This I pray in Jesus’ name. Amen

December 19, 2020 Authority to Forgive Sins Luke 5:17-26

After the Confession of Sins in the Liturgy for Lord's Day worship, the officiant/minister gives a Declaration of Forgiveness. Is that really something a human being can do?

The religious leaders who came from Jerusalem and Judea to check on the legitimacy of Jesus' teaching watched him carefully. His preaching didn't bother them; nor did this wild and crazy through the roof healing make a negative impact on them. But when Jesus said to a paralytic man, "Friend, your sins are forgiven," They manifested total rejection without saying a word.

Jesus knew what they were thinking by the look on their faces. (It was a kind of "If looks could kill, he'd be a dead man" expression). Rather than arguing about it, Jesus cut to the chase with these pantomimers by asking an either/or question: "Which is easier, to say 'your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Rise and walk?'"

The truth is neither of these sayings are easy for men to say. But for the Son of Man, both are granted to him. He has the authority on earth to forgive sins and to heal paralysis.

The proof was in the pudding, as they say. Jesus immediately said to the man who was paralyzed, "I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home." When the man did just that, the message was made abundantly clear. Jesus, is the Son of Man; God, who has the power to forgive sins.

Now back to the liturgy question. Can worship leaders give declarations of forgiveness? Certainly not in their own authority; but like the four men who carried the paralytic to Jesus with faith in him, they may speak His word of forgiveness assured that he will loose the sinner from his/her sins.

Closing Prayer: "What river carries off my sins? What balm can heal my wounds? There is no tide or medicine, But Jesus' blood alone.

All the guilty are forgiven, all the captives are made clean and then set free. Praise the Lord of power and mercy, the blood of Jesus shed for me. Amen.

December 20, 2020 Joy to the World

Luke 5:27-39

My friend has been meeting regularly with drinkers for many years. He calls his mission: "Theology on Tap." As a non-drinker, I've sometimes experienced an internal resistance to this movement. Then I read the stories presented here.

Jesus "went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at his tax booth. And he said to him, "Follow me." And leaving everything, he rose and followed him." Before long Levi "made a great feast in his house and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them." The joy in that house must have been very great.

Upon seeing Jesus eating and drinking with them, however, the Pharisees and scribes grumbled at his disciples saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Here's Jesus' answer. "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

The second story came as an answer to the religious critics who asked why John's disciples fast and pray but yours eat and drink. The answer is simple: "You can't make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is there. When he is taken from them, they will fast." Jesus' message is new wine with new life in it that demands new wineskins flexible enough to expand as the message takes hold. And don't just retreat and say the old wine is good (good enough). It is not.

Once a person has joined the banquet that honors Jesus or has come to the wedding feast hosted by Jesus, there is no limit to the joy that he or she will experience. Taste and see that the Lord is good.

I'm done with the Pharisee game of sour, dour criticism while Jesus is in the marketplace changing lives and receiving others into his kingdom.

Closing Prayer: Dear Lord, I am sorry for my pharisaic resistance to your joyful celebration when outsiders become members of your family. I want to be part of the celebrations at banquets and weddings with you.

December 21, 2020

All I want for Christmas

Luke 6:1-16

An argument about Sabbath hardly seems like a Christmas present. I don't think Jesus himself was into it. He was simply trying to care for his disciples and liberate others of their disabilities. For the disciples and the disabled man, it was good to know Jesus as the Lord of the Sabbath. He had their backs; he had their best interests in mind. If you have a friendship with the Lord of the Sabbath, you have the makings of a great Christmas. For He is always a generous giver of good and gracious gifts.

There's something even better available at Christmas – a deep relationship with Jesus borne out of his prayerfulness and gracious call. He chose twelve of his disciples and designated them apostles.

We are not told in Luke's gospel what Jesus had in mind when he called them. In Mark's Gospel three purposes are revealed. He appointed the apostles "so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons." (Mk 3:14-15)

Is this what you wish for? To be with Jesus is to experience his saving power, his constant presence, his wisdom, his compassion, his gentle affirmation and correction, his instruction in righteous living.

To be sent by Jesus is to be given the opportunity to proclaim the only message that can bring forgiveness and fullness to lives around you.

To be given authority to cast out demons is to be placed on the front line in the battle against the darkness and chaos circling around us in the 21st Century.

I can easily be seduced into thinking that some more things will make me happy at Christmas. The reality is that the only thing that makes Christmas special is the Christ of Christmas. If he promises to be with us, to send us with the precious message of his incoming reign, and to empower us to take a stand in the darkness we have all we could want.

Closing Prayer: Dear Lord, I want you more than anything this world may give. And I want to serve you with the words you give and the power you extend to me for the fulfillment of your purposes. Amen

December 22, 2020 The Blessings of the Season Luke 6:17-49

“God bless us everyone” is a rather sappy ending to the otherwise enjoyable Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens. Sappy? you say. Yes, it is too general, too vanilla, too bland. Jesus offers his followers a much more intriguing blessing.

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven;
Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied;
Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh;
Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil on account of the Son of Man.
Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven.

The blessing presented here is the blessing of facing reality as you experience it. Some are poor, some are hungry, some weep and some face rejection or injustice of one kind or another. To pretend to be something other than who we are in the present moment is to avoid reality. As long as that persists, the possibility of blessing eludes us.

Secondly, the blessing presented here includes the anticipation of a great reversal. God takes people who suffer poverty, hunger, sorrow and injustice into his arms, into his merciful purposes and lands them in a better place. They experience the coming of the kingdom of heaven, the satisfaction of needs deeper than physical hunger; the genuine laughter borne of deliverance from mistreatment. This is the opposite destiny from that which is in store for self-satisfied fat cats who laugh their way through life and who live for the praise of people.

Thirdly, the blessing presented here is the blessing of rejoicing with pure joy – rejoicing and leaping for joy in prospect of a great reward – kept in heaven for all those who are willing to endure until the King returns.

Have a God-blessed Christmas, anchored in reality, anticipating God’s reversal of fortunes and overflowing with rejoicing in God’s reward!

Closing Prayer: Dear Father, you are the fount of every blessing. Tune our hearts to sing your praise. Enable us to see the streams of mercy and to rejoice in hope. Through Jesus Christ our Redeemer we pray.

December 23, 2020 God has visited his people Luke 7:1-17

Tragedies have an especially deep sting when they occur at Christmas time. In response to them, many people open up their wallets and send generous gifts. Some arrive at the Salvation Army headquarters, others show up at the Rescue Mission, yet other donations are passed around the block after the news is circulated that a neighbor has fallen on bad times and lacks the resources to face the need.

A centurion wished to help his servant who was sick and about to die. Though he was a person of significant rank, he did not have the power to rescue this servant. He decided to ask some elders from the Jewish community to render assistance. When they came to Jesus they pleaded earnestly for the centurion and the servant.

Jesus was touched by their intercession and agreed to come with them to the scene of the impending death. He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to Jesus, "Lord don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof...But say the words, and my servant will be healed."

The healing was done from a distance, but not before Jesus commended this man for believing in his gracious authority. God has visited his people, including a Roman centurion. Those who humble themselves before God's Son will be helped.

Soon after that another tragedy was presented to Jesus. This one was beyond help. A dead person was being carried out to the gravesite. When Jesus saw this mother, a widow, who had just lost her son, his heart went out to her. Rather than merely extending his sympathies, Jesus reversed the tragedy entirely.

"Young man, I say to you get up. And the dead man sat up, began to talk and was handed back to his mother." God has indeed visited his people.

Closing Prayer: Dear Jesus, your authority and compassion overwhelm us and change our lives. We thank you for every instance of it and recognize each one as evidence that the Lord has visited his people.
Amen

December 24, 2020 Bah Humbug?

Luke 7:18-35

The generation that Jesus joined in the incarnation was not easily satisfied. Here's how Jesus described them:

“They are like children sitting in the market place and calling out to each other:

We played a flute for you, and you did not dance;
We sang a dirge, and you did not cry.

What was the problem? They had lost their sensitivity both to joy and to sorrow. The Christmas story is sheer joy to the world. It is singing and dancing, eating and drinking, and celebrating the coming of Messiah. If a generation fails to recognize the coming of Messiah, its children will sit down in the dirt and do nothing. Bah humbug, indeed!

As for ignoring the sorrows of Christmas, if a generation fails to recognize the need of a Savior and fails to weep over the sins from which they need saving, the same paralysis will grip the children.

Jesus is God's joy-bringer. God assists in getting the party started by sending angels one at a time in the first instances and then in such large numbers that the shepherds are entirely overwhelmed.

John is the dirge-bringer. He rightfully points to the need of repentance and the prospect of forgiveness for all who will own their sins and the many times they've fallen short of the glory of God.

Don't let Christmas pass you by another minute. Don't sit on the sidelines satiated by the shallow substitutes passed off to you by this generation. Take John's preparatory course to heart; get ready for the salvation of the Lord. Then welcome the one to whom John points – Jesus, Messiah, Son of God, your Savior.

Closing Prayer: O come let us adore Him, O come let us adore him,
O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord. Amen

December 25

Who do you say I am?

Luke 9:18-20

We love a good mystery and watch several of them in the course of a year. Our aim is to identify the thief, the killer, or the lover who wins his bride before the last credits roll at the end of the movie.

The mystery of Christmas concerns the true identity of the child born to Mary. This should not be too difficult for anyone who has followed the story from its beginning in Bethlehem to its climax in Caesarea Philippi.

The angels provide the first clues. Gabriel told Zechariah that he and his wife will bear a son in their old age who will go before the Lord to make ready for the Lord a people prepared. That same angel told Mary that she would bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and shall be called the Son of the Most High God. After the baby was born an angel of the Lord appeared to shepherds in the vicinity of Bethlehem and said:

“Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

Simeon waited a lifetime until he saw the coming of “the Lord’s Christ.” Anna recognized the child Jesus as the redemption of Israel.

When John came of age, he proclaimed Jesus as “the one greater than he, who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” After he baptized Jesus, a voice from heaven declared Jesus “My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.”

Jesus revealed himself as the willing healer, the physician of the soul and the one who had come to call sinners to repentance. He showed that he was the friend of sinners and the Bridegroom present with us.

When Herod heard about Jesus and all that was happening, he was perplexed. “Who is this about whom I hear such things?” Pitiful tetrarch that he was, he never fully figured out the mystery.

How about you? Listen one more time to the dialog between Jesus and the disciples at Caesarea Philippi and draw your own conclusion.

Who do the crowds say I am?

John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets of old.

But who do you say that I am?

The Christ of God.

Closing Prayer: This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing. Haste, haste to bring Him laud, the Babe, the Son of Mary.