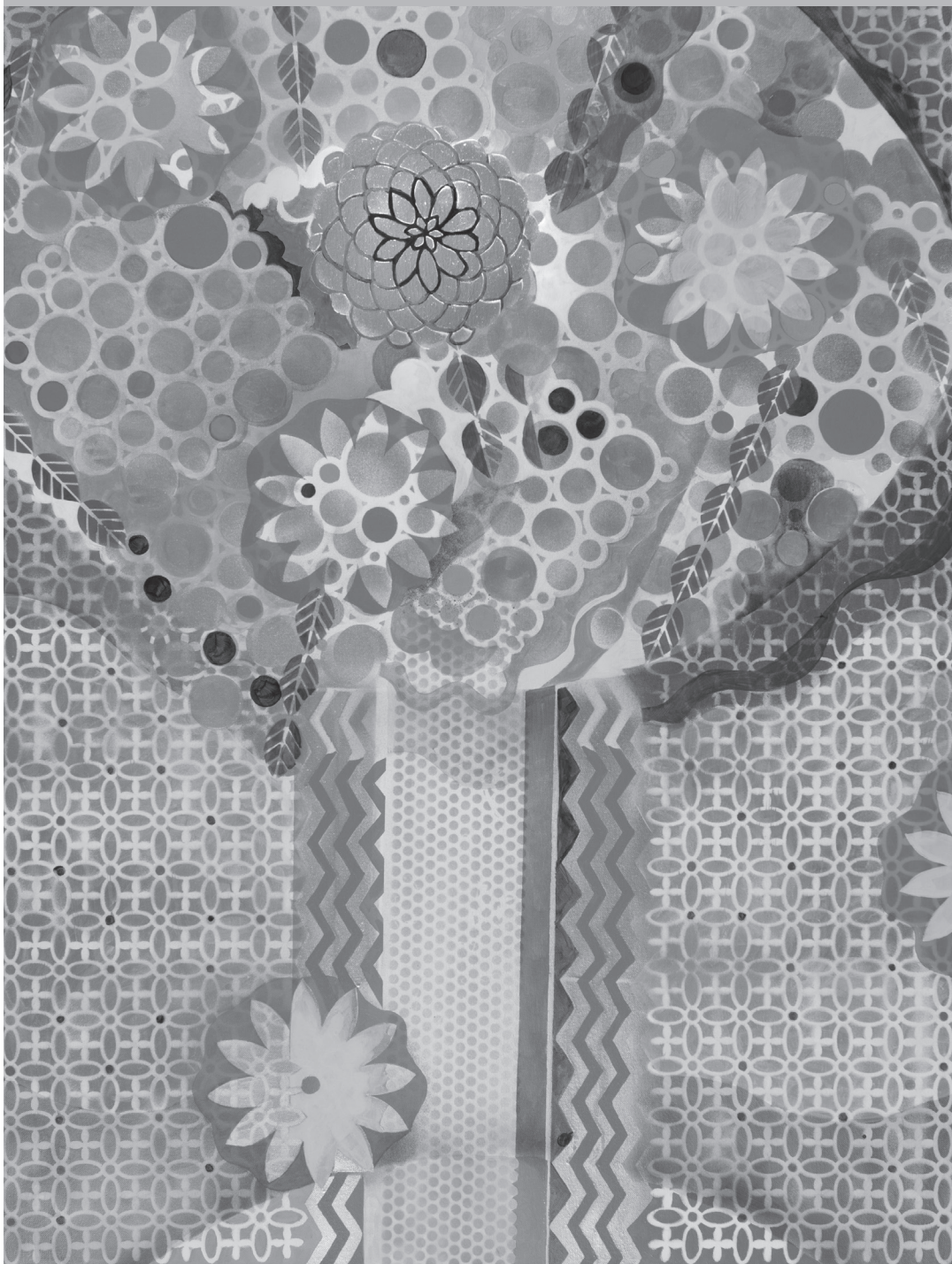


SUNDAYS AND SEASONS
PREACHING
YEAR C 2019





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Preface

Welcome to the 2019 edition of *Sundays and Seasons: Preaching*. Whether you are new to this resource or have been around since we began, we trust you will find real help here for your preaching task in year C of the Revised Common Lectionary.

Our approach to the lectionary readings focuses on the texts in relation to their original settings and to the lectionary day and current context. We present a brief introduction to the day and then the texts. Print users will find the citations and brief thumbnails; online users can click to the complete texts. With these, we list the prayer of the day, the psalm response to the first reading, and the gospel acclamation—pieces that make up the propers for the day. The Readings in the Bible remind us of the circumstances in which these texts were written. The Readings on This Day connect the various readings to this particular day in the church year. Sometimes the connections will be strong, other times more tenuous. The next two sections continue the contributions of Gail Ramshaw: Images in the Readings and Connections with the Liturgy. Then we get to the heart of this resource, the two essays, From a Scholar and From a Preacher. The writers of the scholar essays provide insights into the three biblical texts for the day, focusing on what would be particularly helpful to you, the person preparing the day's sermon. Finally, in the From a Preacher essays, someone who shares with you the regular preaching task takes all that has been gathered together, the entirety of the worship, the day in the civil calendar, and proposes some ways a compelling sermon might come out of it all. These essays are as individual as the pastors writing them. We don't expect that you will take

exactly the approaches that are presented, but we hope you will find much to inspire your own creativity.

At its best, what sets *Preaching* apart from some other similar resources is the wholistic approach. The vision promoted in *The Use of the Means of Grace, Principles for Worship*, and, finally, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* is that the sermon is not a discrete event but something woven into the whole of the day, arising from and commenting on all that precedes and follows: a part of the liturgy, an aspect of the church-year day, the communion meal, all the readings. And of course, the particular assembly gathered on this day is taken into consideration because we are called to provide the living word of the gospel. What does this worshiping assembly need to hear on this day, in this place?

This resource is primarily produced by Lutherans with an eye toward Lutheran worship. So it is full of references to the primary worship book of the ELCA and the ELCIC, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. However, it is built around the Revised Common Lectionary, shared by many denominations. So it should be useful to a broad swath of Protestant preachers, and we invite you to take a look.

Our thanks to you for making use of this resource as a tool for your vital preaching, to the many leaders who contributed to this volume, and to God who calls and gathers the church and continues to bless us in our work.

Laurie J. Hanson
General editor



Preaching Luke in Year C

Among the gospels, Luke's—the focus of year C—is arguably the most loved. It features some of the most treasured stories in the New Testament, like Zacchaeus, the road to Emmaus, and baby Jesus in a manger. It offers some of Jesus' most popular parables, like the good Samaritan, the lost coin, and the prodigal son. It shows a distinct interest in the socially marginalized, like women, widows, tax collectors, Samaritans, and Gentiles. It has a unique interest in the realities of empire, more explicitly visible in its companion volume, Acts. It is the only gospel to feature extended birth narratives (Luke 1–2) and the Ascension, making it historically favored among liturgists and artists. And between its preface (1:1–4) and sheer length, Luke's gospel gives readers the impression of being the most thorough account of Jesus available. These kinds of things led the French scholar Ernest Renan to call the third gospel “the most beautiful book ever written” (*Les Évangiles*, [Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1877], 283). While our praise might not be so extravagant, many of us resonate with the sentiment more than oppose it.

In year C, readings from Luke appear more than forty times on Sundays and festivals. Simply using and preaching the assigned gospel readings may foster some sustained meditation on Luke's narrative, the longest writing of the New Testament by verse and word count. Toward that end, what follows is a basic introduction to Luke and a list of significant themes and special areas worth attention in year C.

Background on Luke's gospel

Virtually all interpreters believe the author of the third gospel also wrote Acts, as related volumes of a shared story (Acts 1:1). Traditionally the author is “Luke, the beloved physician,” a travel companion of Paul (Col. 4:14; also Philemon 24; 2 Tim. 4:11). But in view of discrepancies between Paul's letters and Acts, most critical interpreters question whether the author was Paul's travelling companion. In the absence of a better alternative, conventional practice calls the author “Luke.” Whoever the author was, Luke 1:1–4 implies he was neither an eyewitness nor a follower of Jesus but certainly a believer. Historical likelihood suggests “Luke” was male. He wrote his “orderly account” in clear view of “many” alternative narratives. Theoretically, he wrote for “Theophilus”—most likely a financial patron—but in actuality for a larger audience of readers already committed to the faith. The gospel's strong ties to

the Greco-Roman world suggest the author was a Gentile or Hellenized Jew.

Where the gospel came from is uncertain. Aside from the likelihood Luke did not live in Judea (see Luke 17:11), all else is speculation. Dating Luke's gospel has become more complicated in recent years. For most interpreters, the gospel's clear use of Mark as a source text implies a date no earlier than 80–90 CE. Some New Testament scholars have most recently argued Luke and Acts were written in the early second century, based on commonalities with second-century writings and Luke's potential use of Josephus. For entirely different reasons, a conservative minority holding to traditional authorship believes Luke and Acts were written before Paul's death in the mid-60s. Thus the range of dates for Luke's gospel are wider than for any other gospel. This commentary assumes a date in either the late-first or early-second century.

Major themes

Journey. Distinctive to Luke's gospel, Jesus is nearly always “on the road.” Jesus' most significant teachings take place during his journey to Jerusalem (9:51–19:48), spotlighted throughout year C's time after Pentecost (June–November). Mark and Matthew also feature Jesus teaching en route to Jerusalem, but they dedicate merely 3–4 chapters to the occasion—not 10! These numbers are instructive: Luke envisions “journey” as the prime place for teaching and formation. A classic example is the road to Emmaus story, where the risen Jesus explains his significance in view of scripture to followers (24:13–35). Related, in Luke's second volume (Acts), the most common designation for the Jesus community is “the Way”—a name that itself implies the significance of journey. In these ways Luke's gospel portrays journey as a central metaphor for discipleship and what it means to be God's people, a people always being formed and on the move.

Salvation. Luke's gospel uniquely deems Jesus a Savior (2:11) come to “seek out and to save the lost” (19:10). Jesus saves throughout the narrative by bestowing peace (2:14), extending forgiveness (7:48), removing infirmities (6:10; 8:48), cleansing impurity (17:19), and restoring sight (18:42), to name a few. All these realities are associated with “salvation.” For Luke's gospel, salvation is more than merely the forgiveness of sins: it is liberation from oppression (4:18), the reversal of

status (19:9-10), and full restoration of life. More than a narrow, individualistic experience, salvation in Luke's gospel is a multifaceted jewel, a radical and comprehensive liberation that pervades all of life.

The Holy Spirit. Far more than Mark and Matthew, Luke's gospel claims the presence and power of the Holy Spirit as active through God's messengers. The Spirit accompanies, empowers, and assists Jesus as well as other prophetic individuals (e.g., Luke 1:35, 67; 2:25). While the Spirit assists in various ways, distinctive to Luke and Acts is how the Spirit empowers bold and faithful proclamation in various contexts (Acts 1:8).

Food, table, and hospitality. Every chapter of Luke's gospel refers to food. And in roughly half its chapters, Jesus eats with people. At such meals important events and instruction happen (e.g., 7:36-50; 10:38-42; 14:7-14). For this reason meals become sacred spaces in Luke's gospel, where relationships take shape and hospitality is extended (e.g., 9:10-17; 15:1-2; 19:5). In fact, at many of these meals Jesus teaches on what it means to receive others as guests in his name. In extending such hospitality, some even entertain Jesus himself (24:13-35). These texts not only lend themselves to reflection on the eucharist, but the ministry of hospitality in church and daily life.

The Ascension of Jesus. Luke's writings alone in the New Testament describe Jesus' ascent to heaven (Luke 24:50-51; Acts 1:6-11). Despite differences, the two accounts serve to connect Luke's two volumes. Here Jesus' followers worship him, showing their reception of him as God's visitation. Contrary to popular thinking, the ascension does not imply Jesus has left us, but rather that he has been glorified (see Acts 2:33-36; 3:19-21).

Divine necessity. Luke's writings give the overarching sense that events happen according to God's purpose. A simple phrase embodies this notion: "it is necessary" (Greek *dei*, Luke 4:43; 13:33; 22:37; 24:7, 26, 44). Although merely a word, Luke uses it in ways that imply God is in ultimate control of unfolding events, directing them toward good purposes.

Women. Be it Elizabeth (Luke 1:24-25, 41-45), Mary (1:26-56), Anna (2:36-38), a widow at Nain (7:11-17), an unnamed woman (7:36-50), or Martha (10:38-42), undoubtedly Luke spotlights women more than the other gospels. Here women assume the position of learners (10:38-42) and support Jesus' ministry—perhaps financially (8:1-3). Luke is no feminist by twenty-first-century standards, since women have limited voice and do not step radically outside of conventional roles. But by first- and second-century standards, Luke's portrayals do more than average to deem individual women important to Jesus' ministry. This trajectory deserves no less emphasis today.

The socially marginalized. In addition to women, Luke's gospel distinctively highlights representatives of several marginalized groups: the barren (1:5-25), widows (4:25-26; 7:11-17), Gentiles (4:16-30), Samaritans (10:25-37; 17:11-19), the

physically debilitated (13:10-17), and tax collectors (19:1-10). In fact, Jesus' attention to these marginalized peoples becomes a defining aspect of salvation, defined as status reversal, social restoration, or reconciliation. This emphasis lends itself well to prophetic preaching of these passages in view of unjust marginalization in today's world.

The here and now. Compared with Mark, Luke's gospel diminishes the apocalyptic features of Jesus' message (e.g., Luke 17:21; 19:11-27, cf. Matt 25:14-30). Further, salvation especially takes place "today" (Luke 2:11; 4:21; 19:9; 23:43) and discipleship is a "daily" reality (9:23). These Lukan emphases address well a readership less convinced in an imminent return of Jesus, and lend themselves more readily to conversation about long-term stewardship of our God-given resources.

Literary parallels. Luke and Acts together abound in fascinating parallels, especially between Jesus and the apostles (e.g., Luke 23:34, cf. Acts 7:60; Luke 4:1-13, cf. Acts 13:4-12; Luke 4:16-30, cf. Acts 13:46-52, 28:16-28). These parallels imply that followers of Jesus are called to walk the path Jesus first walked. In this way, Luke's narratives proclaim a subtle but profound message: we are called to emulate Christ (*imitatio Christi*) by embodying his prophetic presence in our own contexts today.

Areas of caution and special focus

Jews, Judeans, and Judaism in Luke. Vastly different interpretations exist for how favorably (or unfavorably) Luke portrays the heritage of Israel and its people. The gospel begins at the heart of Judaism (the temple), but by the end of Acts Israel is marginalized, if not rejected (28:16-28). In some ways Luke's narratives honor the Jesus movement's Jewish roots, and in other ways they abandon them. Still, fidelity to Jewish scripture and tradition are more the norm for Jesus in Luke's story than not. If their first audiences were predominately Gentile, Luke and Acts largely address the question "Where did we (Christians) come from?" Regardless, we do well today to uphold honorably the heritage and name of our Jewish sisters and brothers as we read Luke's gospel.

Good news for the poor. Luke's Jesus has come to "bring good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18), meaning especially the economically impoverished (vs. "poor in spirit"). Luke's gospel deems the poor blessed (6:20), the rich worthy of woe (6:24-26; cf. Matt 5:3), and several rich individuals as deserving eternal judgment (e.g., Luke 16:19-31; also 12:13-21). In the world of Luke's first hearers, the divide between common peasants (about 90 percent of the population) and the elite was stark, making the average peasant's lifespan around forty years of subsistence living. With his strong words against the misuses of wealth, Luke's Jesus stood in prophetic resistance against systemic, socioeconomic inequalities. This Jesus truly spoke good news for the poor. As we encounter many of these texts in the time after Epiphany, we are called to reflect on how we continue Jesus' prophetic ministry today.

The use of wealth. Luke is more concerned than any other evangelist with the faithful use of wealth. Luke's Jesus pits service to God and service to wealth against each other (16:13), insisting "none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions" (14:33; also 18:18-27). Wealth and possessions are best used for sharing, serving the faith community, and assisting those in need (Luke 8:1-3; 12:13-21; 18:18-30; Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-37). Throughout Luke's narratives, faithful stewardship of resources is extremely important and not easily achieved. Still, in the context of such discourse, Luke's Jesus emphasizes, "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God" (18:27). Preachers today do well to take seriously, not dismiss, the provocative challenges of Luke's Jesus, however idealistic or impossible they may seem. Although few would claim to implement these lessons fully, they stand in protest against modern forms of consumerism, materialism, and economic idolatry. Since many of us today identify with the wealthiest societies of world history, we are called to ask hard questions about how we may reflect radical generosity in our day.

Atonement theory? Although historically Christians have used atonement theories to make sense of Jesus' death, we are hard-pressed to find basis for them in the third gospel. Luke characterizes Jesus' death as the fate of a righteous prophet, who—like most prophets in biblical tradition—die without just cause (Luke 9:22, 44; 13:32-34; 17:22-25; 18:31-34). Thus this gospel alone declares Jesus "innocent" at his death (Luke

23:47, vs. "God's Son" in Matt. 27:54, Mark 15:39). The cross is not an atoning sacrifice as much as it is the climactic result of a clash between God's purposes and human malevolence. Jesus undoubtedly saves in the third gospel, but he does so throughout the narrative more than merely at his death (19:9-10; 23:42-43). And his resurrection is God's vindication of Jesus' divine status (Acts 2:23-24, 36). In year C, preachers do well to focus on the cross less through conventional theories of atonement and more by reflecting on what it says about *us* and our frequent unwillingness to welcome Jesus' saving activity and presence.

Luke's theology of the cross. Many readers struggle to find a theology of the cross in Luke's writings. Although Luke and Acts offer no theoretical explanations of the cross, they show a theology of the cross as a *way of life* embodied by Jesus and his followers. This way of life is visible in Jesus' words regarding discipleship: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (9:23). In counterintuitive fashion, Jesus' followers experience joy and the Holy Spirit's empowerment amid opposition, hardship, and trials (Luke 9:23-27; also 10:1-24; 21:12-19; Acts 5:41; 14:22; 20:18-35). Throughout Luke and Acts, followers of Jesus live out a theology of the cross through the pages of their lives.

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December 2, 2018

First Sunday of Advent

Advent is about the “coming days.” God’s people have always lived in great expectation, but that expectation finds specific, repeated enunciation in the texts appointed for these four weeks. The ancients anticipated a “righteous Branch to spring up for David.” The Thessalonians awaited “the coming of our Lord Jesus with all the saints.” Our Lord’s contemporaries hoped for the time “to stand before the Son of Man.” With them we eagerly await the coming days: another Christmas celebration, a second coming, and the advent of our Lord in word and supper.

Prayer of the Day

Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come. By your merciful protection alert us to the threatening dangers of our sins, and redeem us for your life of justice, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Readings and Responses

Jeremiah 33:14-16

In the Old Testament, “righteousness” often has to do with being faithful in relationship. God acts righteously both in punishing Israel for its sin and in having mercy. In today’s reading, Jerusalem’s future name—“The Lord is our righteousness”—proclaims that the Lord is even now working salvation for Israel.

Response: Psalm 25:1-10

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Upon Timothy’s report from the congregation at Thessalonica, Paul is exuberant with gratitude for them. In this passage from his letter, Paul voices overflowing thanks, joy, and blessings for the people of this growing church.

Gospel Acclamation: Alleluia. Stand up and raise your heads your redemption is drawing near. Alleluia. (Luke 21:28)

Luke 21:25-36

God will fulfill God’s purposes and, already, hidden signs of that fulfillment abound. On that great day there will be dismay, perplexity, confusion, and terror, but God’s people shall be given strength to stand boldly and receive God’s promised redemption.

The Readings in the Bible

Luke 21:25-36

The Gospel according to Luke, written in the late 80s by an expert storyteller who built upon Mark, depicts Jesus as the forgiving Savior of the world. Many of the New Testament’s most beloved passages about Jesus are found only in Luke. Luke’s emphases include Jesus as the fulfillment of the Jewish messianic hopes; Jesus welcoming Gentiles into his movement; God’s care for especially the poor and the lowly; and the

Spirit of God empowering first Jesus and, in Luke’s second volume titled the Acts of the Apostles, the church throughout the Mediterranean world. The identification of the author with the beloved physician (Col. 4:14) is now disputed. In 21:34-36, Luke expanded on the apocalypse in Mark by urging believers to watch: the horrific eschaton is indeed coming. Perhaps the evangelist chose to stress watchfulness since the coming of the Son of Man seemed to be so delayed.

Jeremiah 33:14-16

The book of Jeremiah, which took shape after Jeremiah’s death in 587 BCE, chronicles his adventures and records his messages (and that of later prophets) that although God punished the people for their disobedience, God would eventually bring the people back from their exile, rebuild Jerusalem, and restore the Davidic monarchy. Chapter 33 is described as God’s word spoken while Jeremiah was imprisoned. Verses 14-16 are a doublet of 22:5-6. It was common in the ancient Near East for monarchies to be depicted as a tree of life that yielded safety and productivity for the people.

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

The earliest letter we have from Paul, 1 Thessalonians was written before 50 CE to a church that Paul founded in what is now northern Greece. Thessalonica was a provincial capital city; the local coins named Julius Caesar “God” and the emperor Octavian “the son of God.” Paul mentions the good report he received from Timothy’s visit to the Thessalonians, and he urges faithfulness both until he returns to visit them and until the eschatological return of Christ. Eschatological expectation, which is especially strong in this letter, included the gathering of all the saints, alive and dead.

The Readings on This Day

Although the historical record is sketchy, it appears that our Advent arose out of a season of fasting to prepare for baptisms at Epiphany. By the sixth century, an eschatological emphasis was present. Our Advent comprises the four Sundays before Christmas. Each year, the first Sunday deals with our readiness for divine judgment, the second Sunday the ministry of John the Baptist, the third Sunday the Baptist’s call to a repentant life, and only on the fourth Sunday a narrative concerning the

birth of Jesus. God comes, in the past in the history of Israel and the incarnation of Jesus, in the present in the word and sacrament of each Sunday and in the sufferings of our time, and in the future at the end of all things. The lectionary appoints readings to fit this pattern, and their tone stands in stark contrast to our society's weeks of preparation for Christmas. Liturgical advice to keep a meaningful Advent without a December-long celebration of Christmas is meant not to be a killjoy but to awake our longing for the surprising ways that God comes to us.

Luke 21:25-36

The reading calls us to join the Christians of the late first century, wishing for the end of all evil and sorrow and for the coming of the joyous reign of Christ. Christians believe that Christ has already come, is coming this morning in word and sacrament, and will come at the end of all things. Like a tree of life, the fig tree is already full of leaves.

Jeremiah 33:14-16

The Jeremiah passage is chosen as a condensed form of the gospel: the Lord will come to restore justice among the people. It came to be that Christians called Jesus their Lord, the divinely-sent descendant of King David.

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

We pray with Paul that all our waiting for God be characterized by lives of gratitude, love, blamelessness. Such readying contrasts sharply with what our culture expects of us during the weeks of December.

Images in the Readings

The four gospels repeatedly speak of the Jewish apocalyptic figure called the **Son of Man**, a mysterious human-like judge who, as part of the cosmic upheaval at the end of time, will appear in the sky to represent God to the people and the people to God. The figure probably developed from speculation about the vision in Daniel 7. Despite popular misunderstanding that contrasts Son of God with Son of Man, "Son of Man" does not mean that Jesus was the human son of Mary. Today's readings describe the end of the world with the arrival of the Son of Man in both frightening and comforting language. Luke's description of the apocalypse emphasizes people's terror: the day will be like a trap. Yet the summer promises new life.

There are many biblical references to the **fig tree**. An image in ancient myth and literature for male fertility, the fig tree provided both food and shade for Israelites, and even clothing in the story of the fall. In Luke 21 the fig tree is a positive image for the arrival of God. What is now in bud will see its fruition.

It was common in the ancient Near East to depict a monarchy as a tree of life. The idea was that the virility of the king ensured the health and wealth of the nation. Also the Old Testament includes descriptions of David as the tree and the future messiah as a **branch**. For Christians, Christ is that branch, and through him we all share the life of God's true tree.

Connections with the Liturgy

In the Lord's Prayer, we ask God to "save us from the time of trial." It is precisely the dangers and terrors of the eschatological end to which this petition refers. If your assembly is still praying the historic translation of the prayer about "temptation," this Sunday is a good time to begin use of the 1975 translation, which more accurately conveys the meaning of the prayer ascribed to Jesus. Most Christians will indeed experience "a time of trial."

From a Scholar

The Advent season is a time of expectation of God's "adventing." Christian expectation designates a human response to the God of promise and the "life, work, death and resurrection of Jesus."¹ Jürgen Moltmann writes about expectation in relation to eschatology because he understands eschatology as God breaking into the current world through redemptive and reconciliatory acts and God drawing creation into relation with the divine. This double move of God—breaking in and drawing out—generates expectation in those who await God's coming (both God's movement in the world today and God's coming in fullness at the end of history).

What does expectation mean for Jeremiah? Tumult marked Jeremiah's time because of political shifts, Josiah's removal of Assyrian religious practices from Judah, the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and the exile of many leaders to Babylon. Still, Jeremiah consoled: "The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made" (33:14). Jeremiah expected God to provide leaders who would lead with justice. The restoration Jeremiah expected was not about abundance, but about political systems that functioned for justice.

What does expectation mean for the Thessalonians? Paul established the Gentile assembly at Thessalonica, who worshiped amid tensions. They lived in a town dependent on Roman patronage (tensions between Roman ideology and Christian theology), and they expected that the gospel of Jesus Christ was also for them (tensions with non-Gentiles). Although Paul prayed that he would get back to Thessalonica, it was uncertain he would return; the Thessalonians needed strong reserves in order to deepen their worshiping practices in this tension-filled context. They relied on the expectation of the "coming of our Lord Jesus" (1 Thess. 3:13), which is the gospel Paul preached to the Thessalonians.

What does expectation mean for Luke? In Luke 21:25-36 we read that "redemption is drawing near," "the kingdom of God is near," and people will "stand before the Son of Man." Luke recalls expectation of God's coming. Christopher Morse poetically summarized expectation of God's coming when he wrote: "We are called to be on-hand for that which is at-hand but not yet in-hand."²

What does expectation mean for the assembly? With Luke, we ask, what are the dispositions and actions of one called to be on-hand for the drawing near of God's kingdom? With Jeremiah, we explore what it would take right now to recommit to expectation of rulers who lead with justice. With the Thessalonians, we call on God to "redeem us for your life of justice" (the prayer of the day).

Jan Schnell Rippentrop

From a Preacher

The other day our thirteen-year-old grandson said, "Waiting for this. Waiting for that. We're always waiting for something!"

Advent is a season of waiting—waiting for the birth of Jesus, even as our society is consumed with Christmas shopping and preparations; and waiting in expectation for the time when Christ comes again, when God's kingdom comes. How does the church wait as a community "called to be on-hand for the drawing near of God's kingdom" (Jan Schnell Rippentrop)? What would waiting in faith and expectation look like for the assembly on this day?

In the first reading Jeremiah declares that God's promise will be fulfilled: a "righteous Branch" is coming and will "execute justice and righteousness in the land" (33:15). This was a strong witness to faith and hope in the midst of an unjust society. Calling the faithful to thoughtful action around specific issues in our time is a way to wait in faith and expectation.

The entire reading from 1 Thessalonians is a prayer, beginning with Paul's thanksgiving and concluding with petitions for this group that was waiting for Jesus to come again: "And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you" (3:12). Encouraging the assembly in praying and caring for one another and for all people is a way to wait in faith and expectation.

1 Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 143.

2 Christopher Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearing the Gospel as News* (London: T&T Clark International, 2010).

The gospel reading that begins this new church year comes from the end of Jesus' ministry in Luke's narrative. Jesus teaches about signs in the heavens and the earth, which seem rather ominous in our fractious, contentious, and warring world. However, Jesus also provides assurance that even when these signs appear, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Luke 21:33). It would work well to provide examples of God's word continually at work in your community, the nation, and the world. Looking for God at work in the world today, and telling others about it, is a way to wait in faith and expectation.

Nancy L. Winder

Making Connections

- Show children the Advent wreath and talk about how lighting one candle each week is a sign of our Advent waiting.
- Use the wonderful hymns of Advent with their strong texts about waiting for Jesus to be born and looking for him to come again. Bringing that tension and paradox to life for the assembly helps proclaim the importance of our waiting. On this first Sunday in Advent, sing the first stanza of "People, look east" (ELW 248), with its delightful text by Eleanor Farjeon. Sing the first two stanzas of the hymn next week, and so on.



April 28, 2019

Second Sunday of Easter

In spite of all we have heard and all that we have seen, it is often hard to believe. Because it is hard to believe, we will invest ourselves in the Easter mystery for fifty days (a week of weeks). Because it is hard to believe, John the evangelist will provide sign after sign celebrating Jesus' victory over death. Because it is hard to believe, the Lord Jesus will return to us again and again in the mystery of holy communion, inviting us to touch and taste his presence, and offering us his peace.

Prayer of the Day

O God of life, you reach out to us amid our fears with the wounded hands of your risen Son. By your Spirit's breath revive our faith in your mercy, and strengthen us to be the body of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Readings and Responses

Acts 5:27-32

Peter has been arrested for proclaiming the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection. His response to the charges of the high priest summarizes the early church's proclamation of forgiveness of sin through repentance.

Response: Psalm 118:14-29 or Psalm 150

Revelation 1:4-8

The book of Revelation recounts a mystical vision of the risen Christ, experienced by a Christian prophet named John. Here he describes Christ as a timeless redeemer, the beginning, present, and end of all time.

Gospel Acclamation: Alleluia. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. Alleluia. (John 20:29)

John 20:19-31

The unprecedented events of the day of resurrection continue as the risen Jesus appears to his fearful disciples. A week later, after Thomas worships Jesus, Jesus pronounces that the blessings of the resurrection are also for those who "have not seen and yet believe."

The Readings in the Bible

John 20:19-31

In this reading from the Gospel of John, written in perhaps the late 90s, the Spirit handed over at the death of Christ (19:30) is distributed to the disciples. The narrative indicates that by the time of the writing of the gospel, Christians were regularly assembling on the first day of the week. The chapter moves the Easter proclamation from the disciples, through the unbelievers, to those who encounter this good news. The evangelist claims that the gospel book, proclaimed at the Sunday

assembly, manifests Jesus as Christ, the Son of God, who gives life in his name.

Acts 5:27-32

Writing in perhaps the late 80s, Luke presents in Acts a triumphal picture of the church as the ongoing sign of Christ's resurrection. In this excerpt describing a second persecution of believers, "the apostles" had been carrying on Jesus' ministry by healing the sick and preaching the kingdom. Escaped from prison with the help of an angel, they are now being interrogated by the Sanhedrin and the high priest. Peter, whom Luke describes as the leader of the Jerusalem community, responds with a concise Christian creed. Characteristic Lukan details include Jerusalem as the origin of Christian mission, the message of forgiveness of sins, and the power of the Holy Spirit within believers.

Revelation 1:4-8

The book of Revelation, written perhaps in the late first century, applied traditional Jewish apocalyptic imagery to the situation of the early Christian church at a time when the Roman Empire commanded that emperors be worshiped as divine. Apocalyptic visions predict a cataclysmic final battle at which God will finally overcome evil. These visions are tied to "John," which means "beloved of God," and may be invoking the authority of the John in the original Jesus movement. The seven spirits are angels that oversee the seven churches to which the Revelation is addressed. After a standard epistolary introduction, the excerpt includes an early creedal description of Jesus Christ, who reigns over the whole earth as ruler of the earth's kings—thus also of the Roman emperor. God is almighty in past, present, and future, a designation later useful in trinitarian theology. The first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, alpha and omega, suggest God as both the beginning and the end of all things.

The Readings on This Day

The church keeps Easter for eight Sundays. Early Christians referred to Sunday as the eighth day, as if the extraordinary day of the resurrection could not fit within the normal week of seven days. The resurrection begins a new recording of time. The fifty days culminates at Pentecost. Each Sunday,

individually and communally, we meet the risen Christ in word and sacrament.

John 20:19-31

The church continues the pattern alluded to in John's gospel, of assembling on the first day of the week to receive the Spirit of the cross and resurrection and to exchange the peace of Christ. As we expect of John, the narrative in chapter 20 testifies to the identity of Christ as Lord and God.

For Christians, to touch Christ is to touch God, and we do this in the flesh of our neighbor's hand at the peace and with the bread of Christ in our palm at communion.

Acts 5:27-32

Throughout the Sundays of the fifty days of Easter, passages from Acts proclaim the ongoing power of Christ's resurrection, which is not a single day's event but the continuing power of God in the believing community. In this excerpt, the believers continue the ministry of Christ by testifying publicly to his death and resurrection with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Revelation 1:4-8

During the fifty days of Easter in year C, the second readings are exultant passages from the book of Revelation. It is as if in the resurrection of Christ we all are already gathered around the heavenly throne with all the saints and angels to praise the victory of the Lamb. Yet at the same time, we look forward to the end of time, when the agonies described in Revelation will be no more, for believers will follow Christ to be born again from the dead. This creedal excerpt sets the stage for the subsequent six selections.

Images in the Readings

Usually depictions of the crucified or risen Christ include the marks on his **hands and side**. Our archeological knowledge of crucifixions tells us that nails were driven through the wrist, but this knowledge does not negate the symbolism of the palm, which is central to a person's hand. We also do not need to get fascinated by the accounts of the stigmata, for we all carry the

mark of the crucified and risen Christ on our palm each time we receive the body of Christ at communion. Easy talk about healing from one's wounds can be replaced with the Johannine image of the wounds: like Christ, we may scar rather than heal. In John 19:34, blood and water flow from the wound on Jesus' side, and church tradition has seen in this detail not an erroneous description of human anatomy but rather the proclamation that baptism and eucharist flow from the death of Christ.

Each year on the second Sunday of Easter, we meet **doubting Thomas**. He is all of us, and we doubters are glad to share with all other doubters the peace of the risen Christ. It is not easy to believe that we, too, have felt the wounds of Christ. Faith is trust in what is unseen.

According to John, the believing community assembles each **first day** of the week, which was not a holiday until the mid-fourth century. Christians have continued this practice, thus to meet the risen Christ.

No single description of God is sufficient, and today two opposite depictions are superimposed: the **wounded Jesus** comforting his disciples after the resurrection, and the **triumphant Lord** who will judge the earth at the end of time and now rules the world with divine authority ("at God's right hand"). The doctrine of the two natures of Christ is an attempt to hold together these truths of faith.

Today's readings include a wealth of divine titles: Christ is leader, Savior, God's right-hand man, faithful witness, firstborn of the dead, ruler of kings, Messiah, Son of God; God is Father, Lord, Alpha and Omega, the Almighty.

Connections with the Liturgy

Each Sunday Christians exchange with one another the peace of the risen Christ. In some assemblies, the peace has become a kind of seventh-inning stretch during which everyone chats with everyone else about the week's news. It is important to remember the liturgical intention of this greeting: we are enacting John 20, receiving from one another the peace that Christ gave to the disciples. We fill the room with the life of the Holy Spirit, breathing to one another the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection.

From a Scholar

On this first Sunday after the Resurrection we are led into the glorious Easter season to celebrate not only Jesus' resurrection but also our own ultimate redemption. We hear about the very human response to Jesus' death (fear of the powers that kill subversive forces) and to Jesus' appearances (doubt). The structure of the truth-telling imagery in the stories that follow the Day of Resurrection has lifted us up out of our hopeless separation from God and therefore both compels and invites us throughout the season, at minimum, to stand when we receive the bread and wine of the holy supper. We are no longer kneeling in a posture of agonized self-negation. In Christ Jesus, our human selves have been given new life.

The Revised Common Lectionary today appoints the story of Thomas—the one who was not with the other disciples when Jesus first appeared to them. We hear about Thomas because he is so close to you and me. Like us, he did not see Jesus when the risen Christ first appeared to his followers. Thomas, however, knew that Jesus died, and like us, he knew that nobody comes back from the dead.

If the preacher on this day blames Thomas for his need to comprehend the resurrection with empirical evidence in the way of a worthy scientist (seeing Jesus, touching him), that preacher is suggesting that doubt can be avoided. The truth is that we cannot fail to have doubts because, as Martin Luther said, we are unable to believe on our own, but the Holy Spirit comes to us to give us faith (*Luther's Small Catechism*, Third Article, Apostles' Creed).

In the same way that Jesus appeared to the frightened, locked-away disciples to give them faith, Jesus brings peace to dispel our fear and give us the power of forgiveness. He blesses doubt itself with the breath of life. This is the bedrock for our entry into the true celebration of the resurrection season, this Easter time.

God's own knowledge and acceptance of our inabilities make it possible for us to live in peace with our neighbors. Like us, they are also riddled with doubt and fear. Because forgiveness creates compassion, we are given the power to appreciate people for who they are instead of who we wish them to be—including ourselves.

Melinda A. Quivik

From a Preacher

Robert, a bookish high school senior, came to my office wanting to talk about faith. "Why do you believe Christianity is true?" he asked. Not an unusual question for a pastor to be asked, but it always makes my head spin. Ancient "proofs," modern philosophies, personal experiences, elemental human longings, the definition of truth, the nature of religious language, and several Bible stories collide in a colossal mash-up in my mind.

But somewhere in my cosmic conversation with Robert I hit upon a fundamental reason I believe: Christian faith, tradition, and practice connect me to a great love I cannot deny.

In Jesus and what the church confesses about him, I meet and experience divine love flowing to and through me. I hear a Loving Mystery saying, "Peace be with you. Everything that is . . . everything you are . . . is held in the loving, wounded hands of Jesus."

Faith does not come through complicated proofs. It is awakened as the Love that flows through Jesus' wounds is embodied and touches us.

Thomas never touches Jesus' wounds. He doesn't get what he asks for. He proclaims Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" not because he touches the wounds but because the divine love in Jesus touches him.

There is a pattern of discipleship in John's gospel. Someone shares what they have experienced and is met with reluctance and doubt. Others do not accept the message until they have their own encounter with Jesus.

When Mary Magdalene tells the disciples about the empty tomb, they do not believe. They do not celebrate or go into the streets to share the news. They hide. Their leader suffered unspeakable brutality and an ugly death. They fear the same will come to them.

Only when they have their own experience of the Risen One do they enter the joy of resurrection faith (John 20:20). Jesus, still bearing his wounds, comes and stands among them and speaks the word they—and we—most need to hear: “Peace.”

This brings us back to Robert and all who struggle with doubt because of intellectual questions or the experience of shattering loss and pain. How can they enter the joy of knowing what Thomas knew?

They—make that *we*—need to hear Jesus speaking “peace” to our hearts. We need to be touched again and again by the love of the living Lord flowing through the lives of those in whom he lives, despite whatever doubts they may have.

One of our small groups recently shared what boosts their faith and sustains them when troubles come. Stories tumbled out—pain, loss, doubts, questions, anger at God. But in each person’s story there was someone who embodied the resurrected, living love of Christ. Someone, knowingly or not, touched them and spoke the words of peace and assurance they needed.

This Spirit-empowered witness seeds and sustains Christian faith from one generation to the next. Through such as these, the Risen One extends his wounded hands in peace. Look at his hands and know: These hands hold all life and all that you are. Faith comes as we know the touch of those hands and hear the sound of his voice.

David L. Miller

Making Connections

- Jesus comes from the tomb still bearing his wounds. His wounds are no longer marks of destruction but witness to God’s power to give resurrected life to all the deaths human bodies and hearts experience. Our wounds are the very places God is plotting the resurrection. What wounds in our lives have become windows of grace and peace for ourselves and others?
- Invite the children to look at their hands and think about all the ways they use them to write, color, play games, and pet their dog. Then share ways Jesus used his hands to bless, heal, welcome, and calm the troubled hearts of his friends.
- Invite worshipers to write their questions and doubts about the resurrection and have the ushers collect them. No names on the questions, please. Or walk the aisle amid the congregation at the start of your sermon and invite people to share how they feel about Thomas. Avoid blaming him. After all, he is us. Do worshipers identify with him? Share your doubts and questions. Point out how honesty about our doubts and questions is the avenue to intimacy with God.
- Jesus calms the disciples with a single word, “Peace.” Where and how do worshipers know the voice of the Risen One speaking peace to them?