

AN INTRODUCTION TO A BIBLICAL STUDY OF THE CHRISTIAN YEAR

Western (and particularly American) Christians of the twenty-first century approach their faith from out of the western traditions of individualism, independence and self-determination. We view life through the colored glasses of these traditions. Consequently, we read the Bible from these same perspectives. People from Asia, Africa, the Mideast and Latin America, however, read the Bible quite differently. They view the Bible from their cultural perspectives on life as being corporate, intertwined and profoundly social.

Which is right? How should one read the Bible? Well, when one considers that the Bible was written by Mideasterners and not Europeans or North Americans, one must realize that the Bible is written out of a corporate, social and interdependent cultural perspective. Thus, when one reads the Shema, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:4-5); one is primarily reading instructions to the nation (a corporate entity) to be centered in Yahweh, and only secondarily to individuals within that nation.

In order to capture the authentic message of the scriptures, it is important for us who are westerners (and especially Americans) to remove our cultural individualistic sunglasses and see through the clear discerning glasses of a people who both viewed life and wrote their Bible from a corporate, social and interdependent perspective.

Much of the church today uses the lectionary each Sunday to cover much of the Bible in a three-year cycle of weekly readings. Those readings are from the Hebrew Bible, the Gospels and the Epistles (including Acts). The lectionary we use in the dispersed religious community of Partners in Urban Transformation is the *Common Lectionary* (Revised), developed by the Consultation on Common Texts. The Consultation is a forum for liturgical renewal among many of the Christian churches of North America. For this year, we are using Cycle C.

We hope you will find these Bible studies helpful both for your personal reflection upon scripture and in your sharing of scripture through the sermons you may preach or the Bible studies you may undertake.

Robert Linthicum

(Cycle C Advent 1.doc)

ADVENT

The First Season of the Christian Year

ADVENT AND THE CHRISTIAN YEAR

Advent is the beginning of the Christian Year. The Christian Year and the Season of Advent both begin on the Sunday nearest to November 30. Thus, the Christian Year does not follow the Julian calendar, beginning on January 1, but follows its own calendar, beginning in late November or early December.

What is the Christian Year? It is simply the means by which the Christian Church, to some degree or another and in all of its traditions, remembers and celebrates the important events both in the life of Christ and in the church's formation of itself as a community of believers. Even the most nonliturgical of churches celebrate at least some part of the Christian Year – in that they will inevitably celebrate Christmas, Good Friday and Easter. The most liturgical of churches – Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran and Anglican – will celebrate the Christian Year both in its entirety and throughout its worship. Other churches – like the Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists and Reformed will use it optionally in worship so that, for example, you can attend worship in some Presbyterian churches that follow the Christian Year assiduously while other Presbyterian churches will follow it from time-to-time. But the point is that, to one degree or another, all churches will observe at least some portion of the Christian Year.

The formation of the Christian Year began at the very origins of Christianity while it was still a reform movement within Judaism. The very earliest Church would gather as a Jewish community on the Jewish Sabbath to faithfully worship as all Jews would in their synagogues. But they would also gather on “the first day of the week”, the day of Jesus' resurrection, to study together the Hebrew scriptures in the light of their experience with Christ, to enjoy table fellowship together, but most of all, to celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in obedience to their Lord (Acts 1-9). This weekly gathering of Christians to celebrate that sacrament together – even before they had taken their leave of their Jewish heritage – was the origin of the Christian Year.

From that origin in the Christian communities of the earliest Church, the Christian Year began being built. Likely, the first holiday (holy day) the Christians began celebrating as a special day within their year was Easter. Good Friday would have soon followed, then Pentecost, then Christmas. Gradually, more and more days of the year – both Sundays and other days (like the celebration of Christ's baptism by John the Baptist) – were intentionally celebrated by the Church. Polycarp, a disciple of the Apostle John and one of the earliest writers of the church after the writing of the New Testament, noted how the Christians celebrated Easter in the first century. By the fifth century, the Christian Year was well established, and has continued developing ever since.¹

¹ Gibson, George M., *The Story of the Christian Year* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1955), pp. 68=106.

The primary ways the Christian Year is celebrated today is through its seasons and the use of the lectionary. The seasons (e.g., Lent, Advent, Epiphany, Pentecost) provide a vehicle by which churches celebrate significant moments in the life of Christ and use those moments as vehicles for reflection, prayer, the observance of disciplines, or for merry-making! They will celebrate those seasons through music (e.g., Christmas carols, Easter hymns), through brightly colored banners, stoles and paraments (e.g., purple for Lent, white for Christmas and Easter, red for Good Friday – the choice of the appropriate color is obvious), and for some churches, through liturgies. But the most important way the Church observes the Christian Year is through the lectionary.

The lectionary consists of three or four passages of scripture used in every worship service of the Christian Year. Those churches that use three passages of scripture traditionally select from the lectionary an Old Testament lesson, a Gospel lesson and an Epistle lesson. Those traditions that use four passages of scripture add to the lectionary one Psalm each Sunday.

The choice of scripture in the lectionary is for a three-year period. Then it repeats itself. By assiduously using the lectionary over its three-year period, a church will have covered almost the entirety of the Bible. The homily or sermon for the day is to be built upon the lectionary readings, so that what is preached is an exploration and explanation of those scriptures made relevant to life in today's world. Thus, use of the lectionary guarantees that the preacher will not end up pursuing a theological "hobby-horse", continually preaching on what most intrigues him or her. Rather, the lectionary forces the preacher to always be encountering scripture that he or she might not normally study, and allow God to speak to that preacher and through that preacher God's Word for God's people on that Sunday.

THE SEASON OF ADVENT

The word "advent" simply means "coming" or "arrival", and is from the Latin, *adventus*.² Its use in Christianity is in reference to the coming of Jesus Christ. Advent is the ecclesiastical season immediately before Christmas. In Western Christendom, Advent begins on the Sunday closest to November 30, continues for four Sundays, and concludes with Christmas Eve. In the Orthodox churches, Advent begins in the middle of November and is consequently a longer season. In both traditions, Advent signals the beginning of the Christian Year – so it both signals the coming of Christ and the arrival of the "New (Christian) Year"! Its liturgical color is purple.³

The purpose of Advent is to prepare Christians for the coming birth of Jesus Christ. It stresses both the coming of Christ as a babe to the world and his coming again to rule the earth. But it also stresses his continual coming into the hearts of those who "prepare him room". As Pascal so beautifully put it, "Jesus Christ and the apostles taught us that there would be two advents, one in lowliness to humble the proud, the other in glory to exalt the humble".⁴

² Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary

³ F.L. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 19-20; *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), pp. 1035-1036.

⁴ As quoted in Gibson, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

All the liturgies, Advent hymns and the lectionary readings emphasize the doctrine of the Incarnation, and each Sunday has its separate emphasis on a portion of the Incarnation. The first Sunday examines Christ's coming in both Creation and in his Exaltation (the second coming). The second Sunday reflects on the revelation of Christ throughout the scripture (that's why this Sunday is normally Universal Bible Sunday, sponsored by the American and British Bible Societies). The third Sunday looks at the coming of Christ prophetically, both examining the Old Testament prophets and John the Baptist. The final Sunday of Advent concentrates upon the coming of Jesus as a baby in Roman Israel. Thus Advent ends with the attention of all the worshippers being drawn back to the manger and the birth of the Christ child. Our reflections over the next four Sundays will follow this traditional format, as we examine the coming of Jesus "in lowliness to humble the proud, and in glory to exalt the humble"!

(Cycle C Advent 1.doc)

The First Sunday in Advent

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10; Luke 21:25-36; I Thessalonians 3:9-13

As noted earlier, the First Sunday in Advent examines Christ's coming in both Creation and in his Exaltation (the second coming). The scripture lessons in Cycle C for this Sunday concentrate on the Christ's coming in glory.

Jeremiah 33:14-16 is the prophet's promise that the Davidic monarchy will one day be restored. But that "once and future king" will be a monarch of such thorough justice and righteousness that history will reach its fulfillment in him!

Jeremiah 33 is a part of Jeremiah's "Book of Consolation" (chs. 30-33). Most of this prophet's declarations are so pessimistic and full of woe for his nation that the English word named after him, "jeremiad", has entered our language meaning "a prolonged lamentation or complaint"! The one substantive ray of hope in the entire book is Jeremiah's "Book of Consolation" – four chapters out of 52 that provide some measure of optimism for a defeated Jewish people.

The Book of Consolation consists of one or two distinct collections of separate sayings that present hope for Israel in the midst of their destruction and exile. This book is addressed to both the northern kingdom of Israel (which had ceased to exist more than a century earlier) and the southern kingdom of Judah (which was in the process of collapse and conquest (cf. 33:14). The Old Testament lesson for this First Sunday in Advent (33:14-16) was likely composed by Jeremiah late in his career and most likely just after Jerusalem had fallen to their Babylonian conquerors.

In C.S. Lewis' classic tale, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, one of the scenes is most pregnant with hope and anticipation in the midst of what looks like total despair and depression. The four children who had come through the wardrobe were meeting the Beavers for the first time. And Mr. Beaver whispered conspiratorially to them, "They say Aslan is on the move – perhaps has already landed!"

Lewis then continues, "And now a very curious thing happened. None of the children knew who Aslan was any more than you do; but the moment the Beaver had spoken these words everyone felt quite different. At the name of Aslan each one of the children felt something jump in his inside. Edmund felt a sensation of mysterious horror. Peter felt suddenly brave and adventurous. Susan felt as if some delicious smell or some delightful strain of music had just floated by her. And Lucy got the feeling you have when you wake up in the morning and realize that it is the beginning of the holidays or the beginning of summer."⁵

"Aslan is on the move!" Everything is commencing to start to begin to change! And the sign that indeed Aslan is on the move is the appearance of an unsuspecting and naïve and apparently unqualified four siblings who have appeared on the scene! That is what Jeremiah 33:14-16 and what Advent is all about!

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: Collier Books, 1950), pp. 64-65.

The New Revised Standard Version translation of the text begins “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah”. But the Hebrew is more dynamic than that. It is better translated “Look! The days are coming – this is Yahweh’s word – when I will fulfill the promise that I made to the houses of Israel and Judah”⁶. God is on the move, Jeremiah is declaring! He made a promise to the Hebrews about a king like David (and yet greater than David) coming to rule Israel. Well, God is about to deliver on that promise! He is on the move. And that king will come. You have God’s word on it!

Verse 14 is the introduction to Jeremiah’s prophecy – the attention-getting step. But it is the next verse that provides the substantive message. “In those days and at that time I (Yahweh) will cause a true “Shoot” of David to spring forth, who will execute justice and righteousness in the land.”⁷

First, Jeremiah declares that God will act on behalf of Israel’s distress – and that action will be to bring to them a “shoot of David” that will deliver them and will create among them the people that God intends his chosen to be in the world. Christians, of course, have immediately seen that “shoot” as being Jesus Christ. But the word “shoot” captures even more (“branch” is another translation of the word, but doesn’t have quite the evocative power of “shoot”).

Envision what appears to be a dead stump of a felled tree. Suddenly, and then inexorably, out of that apparently-dead stump, a shoot begins to emerge. It grows into a flourishing plant. And then an amazing thing happens to that shoot. It will begin to put forth branches of its own so that, left alone, it will steadily grow into a full-scale tree itself, perhaps even a greater tree than the one it has replaced!

That’s what God is about to do, Jeremiah is suggesting. He is creating a dynasty of people who will call Israel out of exile and will build God’s people faithfully seeking to create Godly society as God has always intended it to be – Second Isaiah, Daniel, Nehemiah, Ezra, John the Baptist – and then finally culminating in the Shoot above all shoots – Jesus of Nazareth, who then in turn creates a new people of God who then build a new and greater and even more flourishing tree – Peter, Paul, Luke, Mark, John, the Church Fathers, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, and on and on and on! God is on the move!

What is particularly startling about 33:15, however, is the work the “true Shoot of David” is to do. The expected work of any great king is to build the power of his kingdom, to build its military might, to defeat its foes and those who would threaten it, and to build the wealth, security and power of that kingdom. But that is not the task assigned by God to the “true Shoot of David”. He is to “execute justice and righteousness in the land.”

Two very strategic Hebrew words are used at this point in the text. “Mishpat” is translated “justice”, and “tsedaqah” is translated “righteousness”. “Mishpat” is a technical word; it is used for a ruling made by a king or judge in a particular situation based upon an established or

⁶ Adapted from the translation done by John Bright, *Jeremiah: The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1965), p. 293.

⁷ John Bright’s translation, *Ibid.*, p. 293.

traditional interpretation or instruction (“torah”) of the statutes and ordinances of the Law. In other words, it is a formal adjudication of the Law as to how Israel or Israelites are to conduct their political, economic, social or religious lives together. Mishpat is as often translated “judgment” or “judging” as it is translated “justice” in the Hebrew Bible.

“Tsedaqah” has a profoundly different meaning. It is most often translated “righteousness”. But it is used in the Old Testament for right action and fair dealing between people, with a particular commitment to righting the wrongs that cause people to be poor, marginalized or needy. It doesn’t simply mean equality of everyone before the Law, but rather an intentional and preferential commitment toward the poor that would tend to make one rule in their favor whenever possible. Thus, whereas “mishpat” is reactive (fully adjudicating the Jewish Law regarding the exercise of the nation’s politics, economics and religion), “tsedaqah” is proactive, intentionally seeking to do justice toward the poor, marginalized and powerless of Israel.

As I stated earlier, “mishpat” is most often translated “justice” or “judgment” and “tsedaqah” is translated “righteousness”. But it is important to understand that the ancient Hebrew (and early and Middle English understanding) of “righteous” is not what is normally meant today by “righteous”. Just as in one century, the word “gay” changed from meaning “merry” to “a person of homosexual inclination”, a comparable change has occurred in the word, “righteousness”. Today, the word “righteous” means “free from guilt or sin” or “being genuine”. But the Hebrew word “tsedaqah” is closer to the original English word “rightwise”, which meant “acting rightly”, “acting in accord with divine or moral law on behalf of the poor”. Thus, a “righteous” person was one who was committed to the empowering and liberation of the poor.

The significance of using both of these Hebrew words in tandem with each other is that Jeremiah is declaring that the commitment of the “true Shoot” will be to a full-orbed practice of justice toward the people – both a reactive and proactive justice. The authentic activity of this messianic king is to adjudicate the Law in such a way that the shalom community of justice, equitable distribution of wealth and relationship with God will be built. But the activity of that Godly dynasty is also a favoring of the cause of the poor, the marginalized, the exploited and the oppressed so that the benefit of the doubt will consistently be given to them and not to those who are the possessors of wealth, power or position in the nation (including the king). Only by practicing an intentional preference toward the poor would the king be able to resist the self-serving interests he and his government would normally represent!

Jeremiah then concludes the casting of this vision of the coming of the messianic king with the words, “In those days Judah will be rescued and Jerusalem will dwell in security. And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘Yahweh-sidqenu’” (33:16).⁸

Jeremiah presents the result of the messianic king and dynasty reshaping society into the world as God intends it to be – a shalom world of justice, equitable distribution of wealth and relationship with God and each other. God’s city – Jerusalem, and God’s people – Judah -- will be known by a new name. That name will become the new name of Yahweh. That name will be “Yahweh-sidqenu” – “Yahweh is the vindicator of our righteousness”. When the monarch, the “true Shoot of David” acts to defend the cause of the poor, the powerless, the marginalized, the

⁸ John Bright’s translation, *ibid.* p. 293.

oppressed, the exploited, and does so by following the stipulations of the Law to build the world as God intends it to be – then it is God who has done this. It is not just a man – even a descendant of David. It is not just a dynasty of Yahweh-believers. It is God Himself. For the true Shoot of David is, indeed, God in the flesh, God working for justice through human hands.

God is on the move!

Psalm 25 is a prayer for guidance and forgiveness. But it is a rather dark psalm. An acrostic, this psalm becomes increasingly pessimistic and despairing as it moves along. At its beginning, we are introduced to the one who is praying as one who is both deeply in despair and turning to God for a way through that despair. “To you, O Lord, I left up my soul; O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame, do not let my enemies exult over me” (vss. 1-2).

At first, the psalmist expects God’s quick intervention. “Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation, for you I wait all day long” (vs. 5). He reminds God of God’s need to act mercifully toward him “Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old” (vs. 6). But he becomes increasingly obsessed by his own sinfulness, and the thought enters his mind that perhaps God will not forgive him. “Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; instead remember me, for your goodness’ sake” (vs. 7).

Finally, the psalmist erupts in total despair as his struggle to be a faithful follower of Yahweh is overwhelmed by his own sense of sin (“pardon my guilt, for it is great” vs. 11), and he doubts that God will act to rescue him. The Psalmist states this in the most poignant words. “Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. Relieve the troubles of my heart, and bring me out of my distress. Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins” (vss. 16-18). But will God respond and rescue him? There is no hint in the Psalm that such happens – only wishful hoping on the part of the Psalmist – “O guard my life, and deliver me; do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge in you” (vs. 20). So the Psalmist moves away from his own pain to end with a plaintive request for his nation, “Redeem Israel, O God, out of all its troubles” (vs. 22). It is as if he is saying, “If you won’t rescue me, at least please rescue my nation!” Will God rescue either? The Psalmist doesn’t know!

The Gospel of Luke. The first year (Cycle A) of the Common Lectionary examines the Gospel According to St. Matthew for the entirety of that liturgical year. The second year (Cycle B) studies both Mark and John. And the third year (Cycle C) thoroughly explores the Gospel of St. Luke. So, for the entirety of this liturgical year, we will be examining the third – and perhaps the most compassionate – Gospel of St. Luke.

Luke’s primary message is built around the theme of salvation. God has come through Jesus of Nazareth both to bring about God’s transforming work in the world and to call God’s people (Israel, the Church) to work for and witness to that salvific effort.

But to say that the primary theme of the Gospel of Luke is salvation is to risk misunderstanding. Contemporary American Christianity's grasp of the nature and extent of salvation is woefully inadequate. When Americans declare "Jesus saves", they mean that Jesus' death redeems individuals from their sins. But the concept of salvation presented by Luke is far, far richer than that.

According to Luke, salvation is personal and individual. But it is also social, corporate, and even cosmic. The biblical understanding of salvation is that it is both individual and corporate, private and systemic, both human-focused and environmental, both for people and for the political, economic and religious systems of society, for the city, the nation, the world, and even the universe (Luke 13:34-35; Rom. 8:18-25; Col. 1:15-20; John 3:16-17; II Cor. 5:17-20; Rev. 11:15-19; Rom. 7:7—8:4). Joel Green, considered the premier scholar on Luke, writes, "Throughout, the Lukan narrative focuses attention on a pervasive, coordinating theme of salvation. But salvation is neither ethereal nor merely future, but embraces life in the present, restoring the integrity of human life, revitalizing human communities, setting the cosmos in order, and commissioning the community of God's people to put God's grace into practice among themselves and toward ever-widening circles of others. Salvation embraces the totality of embodied life, including its social, economic and political concerns."⁹ To study the full-orbed biblical understanding of salvation, please read chapter three of the book, *Building A People of Power* by Robert Linthicum (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Press, 2006), pp. 63-83.

Luke develops this theme of salvation within the sweep of salvation history. It is not happenstance that the book includes within it a genealogy of Jesus' ancestors. Nor is it happenstance that this list includes some of Israel's greatest worthies: Methuselah, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Boaz, Jesse and David (Lk. 3:23-38). A commitment to Israel and Jesus' longing to return Israel to its theological and historical roots in building shalom throughout the world permeates Luke. And the Gospel of Luke is, in reality, the first volume of a two-volume work by this author that relates the history of the church after the resurrection of Jesus (the Acts of the Apostles), so that the continuity of the people of God continues to be traced up to the moment of the writing of these two books. "For Luke, the theme of salvation is inextricably bound up with the status of Israel as the people of God. Jesus has come for nothing less than to bring restoration to Israel. Thus, the mission of Jesus, and of the church that is its consequence, is the fulfillment of God's promises to save Israel and make it a light to the nations".¹⁰

The symbol that Jesus uses throughout the Gospel of Luke as the means by which he describes both God's intentions for Israel and for the "new Israel" – the emerging church – is the symbol of "Jubilee". It is the concept of Jubilee that most encapsulates the scope, extent and depth of salvation that God would work among God's people. And it is the practice of Jubilee that is the indicator that any given people are truly the "saved" nation, community or church they claim to be.

⁹ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke: The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), pp. 24-25.

¹⁰ Joel Green, "The Gospel According to Luke", *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), p. 1847.

The book of Luke is built around the conceptualization and practice of Jubilee. The Gospel itself is centered on the most formative passage of that book (peculiar to Luke only) – Luke 4:14-21 – where Jesus clearly and unequivocally states his mission in life (see the Jan. 21, 2007 commentary on Lk. 4:14-21 in this study of the Lectionary Cycle C for a full examination of this passage). In that passage, Jesus clearly declares that his arrival is signaling the coming of Jubilee upon Israel – a jubilee that, if practiced, will result in the profound salvation of all who embrace its reordering of society. In a most profound sense, one can say that the Jesus portrayed in the Gospel of Luke is the “Jubilee Jesus”!

The Jubilee and Sabbatical Year legislation of Leviticus and Deuteronomy is legislation intentionally created to redistribute wealth. From Moses to Jesus, the insight of Israel’s great prophets was that it is the way a nation or a people use money that will determine not just their economics, but their politics (as being just or oppressive) and religion (whether centered in relationship with God or seeking to control and dominate), as well.

Jubilee is a legislated reversal of fortune in which society is periodically rebalanced economically, so that wealth can’t accumulate nor power accrue in the hands of a self-selected few (in Jesus’ context, that would be the Herodian nobility, Israel’s land-owners, and the religious elite – the priests, the Sadducees and the Pharisees). With the announcement he makes in Luke 4, Jesus places Israel’s leadership on notice that his coming is God’s action to reverse Israelite society so that wealth and power cannot be built up in their hands while all the rest of the people are thrust ever deeper into poverty. Messiah is here to bring in the jubilee.

Thus, the gospel of Luke is a gospel about Jubilee. For example, the gospel of Luke is filled with stories about Jesus’ identification with the poor, his call to the rich to deal with their money that stands between them and God, and his confrontation of the systems. Thus, the gospel is filled with stories of miraculous healings, exorcisms and transformation of people – a leper, a paralytic, a man with a withered hand, a widow’s son. And those healed are primarily the expendable ones and peasants. Jubilee is being literally fulfilled in front of everyone.

Likewise, no gospel is as rich in parables as is the gospel of Luke. The parables of the Good Samaritan (10:25-37), the Rich Fool (12:13-21), the Place of Honor at a Feast (14:7-14), the Prodigal Son (15:11-32), the Unjust Steward (16:1-13), the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31), the Unjust Judge (18:1-18) and the Pharisee and the Publican (18:9-14) are all stories that appear only in the Gospel of Luke. Each one of them deals with money. Each one of them deals with the responsible or irresponsible response of the rich to the poor. And each one of them consequently deals with a Jubilee theme.

Similarly, Luke’s report of Jesus’ treatment of women is equally liberating. One of the most helpless group of people in Israelite society were women, especially those who were not married, were widowed, or who had no protector. One of the remarkable elements in Luke’s gospel is that Jesus pays particular attention to women, taking them seriously. In the birth narrative, the places of honor are given to both the mother of Jesus and her cousin, Elizabeth, while both their husbands either get scant or negative attention. In Luke, “a woman of the city, who was a sinner” is defended by Jesus before the Pharisees and forgiven of her sin (7:36-50). As well,

Jesus ministers to both Mary and Martha – and most remarkably of all, takes quite seriously Mary’s hunger after spirituality, thus breaking all Jewish tradition (10:38-42).

Thus, for Luke’s Jesus, salvation is both understood and practiced through the vehicle of Jubilee, as this Gospel centers itself on the transformation of the world into a society of justice, equitable distribution of wealth and dynamic relationship with God and each other that is lived out through that newly-emerging Israel that Jesus founded – the Church!

Luke 21:25-36. Surprisingly, the lectionary’s study of the Gospel of Luke begins, not at the beginning with the story of Jesus’ birth but near the close of the book. Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem, preparing for his inevitable trial and crucifixion at the hands of both Rome and Israel’s establishment. Jesus prepares his disciples both for his violent death and for the long-term violence his death will unleash upon the church by talking about the end-times.

Jesus describes those end-times by pointing out that there will be many natural disasters (“earthquakes, famines, plagues”), human-brought disasters (“nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom”) and continuing persecution of the church (“they will arrest you and persecute you, and will hand you over to synagogues and prisons”). Jerusalem itself will be destroyed, and “you will be hated by all because of my name” (21:7-24). Then Jesus said,

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (21:25-28).

In this passage, Jesus describes the culmination of the clash between those who join with Jesus in proclaiming the salvation that creates a Jubilee people, and the systems and people of society that battle such a world because they want to remain dominant, exploitive and oppressive. What Jesus wants to do here is to disabuse his followers of two thoughts. First, the end of the age will come quickly. Jesus wants them to understand that the end will be a long time in coming, for there must be the passage of considerable time for the evils of domination, oppression and exploitation to reach their zenith of power.

Second, in embracing Jubilee, Jesus’ disciples could embrace a naïve assumption that their intervention in the affairs of the world on Christ’s behalf will be welcomed by the world, and the consequence of that intervention will be that the world will slowly become better and better. Nothing could be further from the truth, Jesus teaches here. What in reality will happen is the exact opposite! The closer God’s people get to both effectively practicing and proclaiming a gospel of political, economic and religious transformation (“salvation”), the more the systems, those providing leadership to the systems and those who benefit the most from the political and economic inequality of the systems (that is, the seduced middle class) will resist that transformation. The result will be a steadily growing opposition to the church and any practice of the people building relational power and consequently sharing wealth and power.

The Old Testament prophets predicted this phenomenon, Jesus implies by the very images he uses from Isaiah (8:22; 13:4-11, 13), Ezekiel (32:7-8), Joel (2:10, 30-31) and Amos (8:9). They all spoke of “the Day of the Lord”. And Israel chose to view the coming of the Day of the Lord as being a day of vindication, power and transformation for them. But they were mistaken.

“Woe to you who desire the Day of the Lord. Why do you want the Day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light; as if someone fled from a lion and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall and was bitten by a snake. Is not the Day of the Lord darkness, not light; gloom, with no brightness in it?” (Amos 5:18-20; also see Isa. 2:12; 13:6-13; Obad. 15; Zeph, 1:7, 14; Joel 1:15-20; 2:11). The Advent of the Son of Man is not something to look forward to. Rather, for those who seek control and power, wealth and prestige – or even a trouble-free existence – the coming of the Son of Man is the coming of the Day of the Lord, and therefore of judgment and destruction!

But Jesus realizes that this message, although desperately needed in order to keep his followers realistic about life, is also terribly debilitating in its pessimism. And therefore, in 21:29-36, he turns from prophetic warnings to pastoral counseling. Those who follow the Jubilee way will gain the capacity to be truly discerning about both God’s priorities for the world and the seductive ways the powers act to deceive the people. Thus, Jesus’ followers will be able to interpret the “signs of the times” – the events happening to and around them – and thus remain faithful in their witness, in their actions and in their life together to the heavenly vision of humanity as a redeemed and transformed Jubilee community!

I Thessalonians 3:9-13 is the conclusion to Paul’s response to a report that Timothy, Paul’s companion and fellow missionary, had made to Paul about the Thessalonian church. Paul had sent Timothy to Thessalonica to support and encourage the Christians there (3:1-5). In his report back to Paul, Timothy shared about the stability and spiritual depth of the Church in Thessalonica, of their faith in God, their love toward one another, and particularly of their fond recollection to Paul and a commitment to his leadership and theology (3:6-8).

In the light of Timothy’s positive report, Paul writes to the Thessalonian Christians of his joy and pride that he takes in them. Further, he prays that the way will be made clear for him to visit them so that he might encourage them and strengthen their faith (3:9-10).

Paul’s grateful response to the Thessalonian church results in a record of his prayer for them (3:11-13). The striking thing about this prayer is that it is addressed both to God and to Jesus, with the verb in verse 11 being in the singular instead of in the plural. This is an indication that, at least at an unconscious level, Paul simply accepts Jesus as being a part of the Godhead and thus inseparable from God (although also a man).

Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonian Christians has three primary points to it. First, he prays that God the Father and Son will act to bring him back to the Thessalonians (vs. 11). Second, Paul prays that the Thessalonian Christians will grow in the kind of love for each other (*agape*) that God has for them (vs. 12). Third, he prays that God will continue to work in and among them as

God's community of faith so that they remain blameless until "the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints" (vs. 13).

This final portion of the prayer and Paul's expectations of "the coming of our Lord Jesus" demonstrates that Paul believed that there would be a double Advent for Jesus. There had already been an initial Advent, in which God's people awaited Jesus' birth. And there would be a second Advent, with the church expectantly anticipating his return in glory "with all his saints". Paul believed that Jesus would return in power and triumph!

Thus, following Paul, the church waits expectantly for God on the move! Perhaps "he has already landed"!¹¹

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¹¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *op. cit.*, p. 64.