

Epiphany III Year C 2016

O. K. so we really are going to be reading in Luke... We told you back at the beginning of Advent that we were beginning year C in the lectionary, Luke's year... and just as soon as we told you that, we started reading from the gospel of John. As you know John doesn't have a designated year in the lectionary... John just comes and goes, usually around the red letter events of the church year... But Christmas has come and gone and now we are back in the ordinary run of readings... so we really will be in Luke for the next several Sundays.

Apropos of that I want to take a few minutes and say a few things about Luke's gospel... Luke's principal concerns... His particular agenda, if you will... Just to get our biblical motor running for the coming year... Luke is often called the most literary of the gospels.... He is a consummate story teller...It's Luke's birth narrative we always read at Christmas... about the trek to Bethlehem, and no room in the inn... the shepherds and angels... the child wrapped in swaddling clothes... It is Luke only that tells the stories of the prodigal son... the Good Samaritan, and the walk to Emmaus... Luke is also the author of Acts... telling the dramatic story of Paul's conversion, the accounts of the early martyrs, and the struggles and triumphs of the early Christian church.

Luke is focused on three main things, as I read him. So in our reading look for these motifs: First, he is concerned with the prophetic tradition of Israel... The prophets were the revered truth tellers in Israel's history, the sages of their society, the ones paying rapt attention... calling out corruption that always seemed to find a way into the political hierarchy of Israel... and they were the ones who were forever reminding the people that God loved them, and how that love is, or should be, reciprocated, and how that love is acted out, practiced, in the world around them. For Luke it is most important that Jesus is connected to the prophetic tradition.... that he represents not some new-fangled religious cult, but that he represents a continuance of the rich tradition of keeping the faith... that the Jesus movement is nothing less than a renewal of Judaism... the ancient faith renewed for their own historical context.... The idea, popular among some modern Christian theologians, that God somehow rejected Judaism for a new and improved, and radically different revelation.... That God somehow got therapy between the Old and New Testaments... That notion would be anathema to Luke... For Luke the Jesus movement is an orthodox re-articulation, an artful re-

imagining of the ancient faith handed down from generation to generation.... The prophets being the bearers of the lore.... From Moses to Elijah to Isaiah to Jeremiah.

The second thing on Luke's mind, certainly related to the legacy of the prophets, is the presence of the Spirit...The Spirit, that ever-present force that animates humanity, that force that empowers humanity to love... God inhabits our world as Spirit... not as a passive abstract presence... but a presence of decisive action in every act of love... The Spirit is not something unattainable, or experienced in fleeting moments only, but it is the life force that we are duty bound in practice to recognize... name it, celebrate it... the Spirit is the life force in which we live and move and have our being. The Spirit for Luke is the inspired imagination... that knows the truth, and acts upon it... And finally the Spirit is about revolutionary change. The Spirit will not leave well enough alone. The Spirit is always about the restorative, creative process... turning over the tables of the old, and beginning the new... If you believe that the arc of the universe bends towards justice and well-being and beauty, it is the Spirit that drives it. The Spirit still about the process of creation itself. Prayer for Luke is the practice of paying attention to the movement of the Spirit.

And last, but not least, related to the other two, is Luke's principal theme... and that is the theme of "reversal". Theologically, it is the reality of heaven becoming the reality of earth... "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." And on a practical level this is all about the social and economic, and the political... all of these are the manifestation of the spiritual... We modern people divide reality into categories like physical and spiritual, sacred and secular... Luke doesn't distinguish between such categories... They are all of a piece... In seventy five percent of the parables Luke attributes to Jesus, the subject matter is money... economics... the use of wealth... You remember in the beginnings of this gospel Mary reflects on her being told that she will give birth to the anointed of God... She not only says yes to the prospects of the Spirit, but she also calls for a reversal of things... things social and economic and political... the poor will be filled with good things she says, while the rich will be sent away empty... people of low social status will be given dignity.... The powerful will be unseated. She is calling for a new order... She is calling for the very transformation of the world. Paul speaks of this in his letter to the Corinthians. He speaks of the reconstituted body of humanity in which the so-called inferior are honored... It is a reversal, a transformation.

Now in the lore of the Judea-Christian tradition we have been predisposed to believe that this transformation, this final consummation happens at the end... that at the so-called last day God will be all in all... that the hoped for vision of God's world as it should be is a decidedly future event... that we struggle in the mess until God finally sets things right... the Apocalyptic literature of the bible teaches as much... but Luke is not of that school of thought... In our reading for today, Jesus reads from the ancient scroll of Isaiah... He reads of the ancient promise to God's people... reiterating Mary's song.... I bring good news to the poor... release to the captives... sight to the blind (figuratively and literally).... Freedom for the down and out... that the jubilee, the abundant life of God, is upon us... that social, economic and political transformation is upon us... and then he declares that this promise is fulfilled... that the reality of this audacious promise is not about the future, but about the here and the now. My question to you as post-modern Christians is... do you believe that? Do you believe that this vision we celebrate Sunday after Sunday is upon us.

Brothers and sisters, don't you know, the Spirit of the Lord is upon you to bring about the revolution of God's favor... There is so much talk these days about the church being relevant... countless studies have been done on how to reach the unchurched... how to become relevant again... And I want to say that if we are willing to live the gospel which in short is to love our neighbor; to include all at God's table in the warmth of community... to love kindness, and do justice... to pay attention to the rhythm of the Spirit then the church will not only be relevant, but it will thrive. We must bring heaven to earth... and I'm not talking about an abstract idea of heaven... I'm talking about the presence of the Spirit which will not sleep until all is changed... the great reversal, the great restoration when the entire body of humanity is brought into God's loving favor, reconstituted... and that means everybody... no outcasts. The Spirit knows no outcasts.

Don't you know, the Spirit of the Lord is upon you to be prophets of the truth... the Spirit of the Lord is upon you to change the world... to bring about the age of God's favor... so says the Spirit Word fulfilled in our hearing.