

Exegetical Notes for December 2018 – Year C

Our thanks to the Rev. Chris Roth (Regional Dean of Red Deer, and Rector of St Leonard on the Hill, Red Deer) for writing the Lectionary Notes this month.

December 2, 2018 – First Sunday in Advent

Luke 21:25-36

Our society is gearing up for Christmas. Today's Gospel reading grinds against the snowman decorations. Advent is a season that brings a certain level of tension. Our culture is ready for Christmas, but in the church we are in Advent and instead of hearing heart-warming stories about the baby Jesus or pregnant Mary on her way to Bethlehem, we hear readings calling us to repentance, and warning us to prepare for a coming judgement.

The Gospel reading is probably about the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem 40 or so years after Jesus was resurrected. The language is very symbolic, and so we shouldn't necessarily be thinking about actual sun, moon, and stars. Often the skies were viewed as a reflection of what was happening on earth. The sea was a symbol of unpredictable chaos. So, all of this may have been speaking about the marching of the Roman legions into Jerusalem and destroying the city and the Temple. It would have been a massive blow to Judaism itself because the Temple was where the festivals took place. It was the only place where the sacrifices to deal with the sins of the people were allowed. Its destruction would have sent Judaism into an identity crisis. Many of the early Christians saw this destruction as judgement. Christians also believed that Jesus replaced the temple. He was now the place to deal with sin, not the temple.

But Christians have also seen readings like this pointing into the future to the time when Christ will come again, which is why we have the reading today as we begin Advent. In Advent we think about Christ coming to us as a baby. It is a time when we remember John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness to prepare the way for the messiah. But, we also imagine Christ coming to us again, this time in power and as judge. This is often called the 2nd coming.

Many people have gotten lost in the project of trying to identify when precisely Christ will come back. Obviously, we should be very wary of these kinds of predictions. However, this doesn't mean we shouldn't be expecting Christ to come again. If we believe Christ's words, then we should expect it. He says he will come "like a thief in the night" (1 Thes 5:2). So, it will come as a surprise. Yet, we should be expecting it. Be diligent. Watch

yourselves. Do not allow the cares of this life to trap you. Live like he is coming back at any moment. Don't be seduced by debauchery, or drunkenness. Watch. Stay awake. Don't literally stay awake, rather, be aware. Pay attention to your life in the light of Christ. What if he came today? What if he came at 10pm tonight, or 7am tomorrow morning?

In many of us there is a little twinge of fear when we think about Christ's return. The preacher, Austin Farrer, said, "The God who saves us is the God who judges us. We are not condemned by his severity and redeemed by his compassion; what judges us is what redeems us, the love of God. What is it that will break our hearts on judgment day? Is it not the vision, suddenly unrolled, of how he has loved the friends we have neglected, of how he has loved us and we have not loved him in return; how, when we come before his altar, he gave us himself, and we gave him half-penitences, or resolutions too weak to commit our wills? But while love thus judges us by being what it is, the same love redeems us."

Commentary for this Passage:
Abingdon New Testament Commentary

December 9, 2018 – Second Sunday in Advent

Luke 3:1-6

Our Gospel reading opens with a list of names, mostly obscure and hard to pronounce. What Luke is trying to do is to place this story in history. Ancient historians would often describe time by pointing to the year of an important ruler. So, what all this means is we can place the ministry of John the Baptist sometime around 26 to 28 AD, by our way of measuring time. It would be a bit like saying, “in the 65rd year of the reign of Queen Elizabeth the second, and the 3rd year of the leadership of Justin Trudeau as Prime Minister of Canada.” I know these names and dates don’t mean a lot to us, but Luke wants us to know that the story he is telling has a place in history, with real people and real places. We do this every week when we say the creed. We mention the name “Pontius Pilate”. Why do we mention that name? He was a pagan. The ancient historian Josephus described him as ruthless and greedy. So this ruthless, greedy, pagan, and relatively obscure Roman governor who was responsible for having Jesus crucified is mentioned in the middle of the holy liturgy. Doesn’t that seem strange? I think it would be incredibly strange to Pontius Pilate that Christians all over the world in numerous languages for nearly two thousand years have been mentioning his name as they worship. We do that because we believe that Jesus was a part of human history, with real people in real places.

At this point it had been 400 years since they heard God’s word from a prophet and now Luke tells us “the Word of God came to John”. The silence has been broken. John is speaking God’s word in the wilderness. It is a place of testing and purifying, which is exactly what John is about. Many years before, after the Hebrews were rescued from slavery in Egypt they spent 40 years in the wilderness. It was a time of testing and purification. Then they entered the Promised Land by crossing the Jordan River. It was to that same river that John called the people. He called them to come back to the Jordan River and reenter the Promised Land. They had failed as God’s people and John was calling them back to the Jordan River to cleanse themselves of their sin and prepare for what God was about to do. John called the people to repentance.

We tend to think of repentance in a very negative way. When we hear the word “repentance” our modern minds think of bad self-esteem or medieval monks whipping themselves, but that wasn’t necessarily what was in the minds of the crowd who heard John. Repentance means to change your mind or change your heart. It is a change of direction. If you are walking into the street and a bus is about to hit you and someone yells at you and you step back onto the curb, you have made an act of repentance. It is about turning away from something bad. But, repentance can also be positive. Maybe

you have been in the mall and you have suddenly smelled popcorn and if you're hungry you will change your direction towards the popcorn- that too is repentance. Repentance is turning away from what is bad, but it is also turning towards what is good. The turning towards is more important. You can't live a holy life by just turning away from bad continuously. Or, perhaps think of it this way. You won't have a garden by just pulling weeds all the time. All you will have is dirt. You have to plant flowers and nurture them. Yes, we want to repent and turn away from the bad, but more importantly we want to turn towards what is good. When we turn towards God we are turning towards the source of all beauty, joy, and truth. When we turn away from God we are turning away from the source of all beauty, joy, and truth. That path eventually leads to ugliness, sorrow, and deception. When we turn towards God, we align with the very purpose we were created, which is to love God and enjoy Him forever.

As Christians, we live lives of repentance. Which is really just another way of saying we live lives of learning. We are continuously seeking to know more of God and to have our lives adjusted according to His beauty and holiness. It is also true that God is continuously on the move. Our God is on a mission and that means we will have to continuously have to adjust our course to follow Him. This means we are going to be living a life of continuous turning, or repentance, if we are going to try to be a part of what he is doing in the world and in our lives.

Commentary for this Passage:
New Interpreter's Bible Commentary

December 16, 2018 – Third Sunday in Advent

Luke 3:7-18

John represents the school of the prophets. He is dressed like Elijah. They both wore Camel's hair garments with a leather belt around the waist (2 Kings 1:8 and Matt 3:4). Elijah was the prophet's prophet. He was supposed to come before the messiah would arrive (Mal 4:5). John also had the words of the prophets on his lips (Mal 3:1; Is 40:3-5). The cry of the prophet is "repent", which means to turn. You repent when you head down the wrong road and when you realize it you make a U-turn. It involves both turning away from what is wrong and turning towards God and His ways. The prophets usually arose to call people back to the Law and Covenant. John the Baptist represents the prophets and, in a way, represents the Old Testament, both in calling people to repent, and in pointing to the coming Messiah. John stands in the gap between the Old Testament and the New.

John has a hard message for the crowds. That means he has a hard message for us too. It's like going to the doctor and he tells you that you are overweight, or that your blood pressure is way too high, or you drink too much, or you need to stop smoking, or stop eating salty foods. It's not always a comfortable message to hear, but it is ultimately for our good. If we are willing to hear it we can make a change that might save our lives. If you are coming to John to be baptized then you are admitting you are a part of the problem. The world is in a mess and unless you are willing to admit that you are a part of that mess you have no business seeking baptism from John. His baptism is for repentance. That means we see ourselves running from God and then we stop and turn back. Yes, it is shocking and offensive, but if we are in need of repentance, then vipers we are. If we are not a "brood of vipers" then we don't need to repent and why are we out in the wilderness seeking out John the Baptist? Are we just voyeurs? If we are going to take John seriously, then we have to take our sin seriously and not sugar coat it by saying things like "well, I'm only human", or "everyone does it". John wants us to look at our lives intensely and seriously.

John wants us to come out from behind the images we hold up to pretend we are okay with God. The Jewish people in John's day would sometimes hide behind the fact that Abraham was their ancestor. John says your family lineage doesn't count for squat. God only has children- he doesn't have any grandchildren. We can't speak about the faithfulness of our parent, or say "my grandfather helped build this church" and think that gives us some special favor with God. God has no grandchildren. Likewise, we can't say I've attended church all my life as if church attendance is automatically an "in" with God. Neither can I say, "I'm a priest" and hope God goes easy on me. On the

contrary we are told we will be judged more strictly. God cares about the state of our hearts, not our role in the community, not who our parents are, or how long we've been Christians. John uses the image of a tree. He says that when we say that we are God's children it's like a tree declaring itself to be an apple tree. But, John says you know a tree by its fruit. What good is an apple tree that never produces apples? John says it's firewood. John wants us to "bear fruits worthy of repentance". He doesn't want us to just say "we repent". Neither does he want us to thoughtlessly say, "Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent." John says that God wants to see that repentance has really hit us. He wants to know it is a reality and not just words. Have we shed tears over our sin? Have we felt pain because of the hurt we have caused someone? Not embarrassment, or the pain of getting caught, but pain because of the wrong we have done? Have we shed tears because of the offense we have caused God? Those tears are fruit of repentance. Have we tried to make things right?

The people ask John what kind of fruit he is talking about. What does he say? Interestingly, this prophet doesn't give a bunch of religious suggestions. We might think that a religious guy like John might suggest that we pray more, or read our Bible more. Our problem is not often that we aren't religious enough, it's usually that our hearts have become hard. What does he think we need to do to show that repentance has taken root in our hearts? Another prophet, Isaiah, quotes God as saying this, "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught" (Isaiah 29:13). "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. ... Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. ... Your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. ... Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause" (1:11-17). For Isaiah, they would meet in the Temple and sing psalms about God being just and holy, but then they would leave worship and act cruelly and oppressively. Their primary problem wasn't that they weren't religious enough. It was that their hearts weren't right.

The crowds ask John what they should do to show that repentance has really taken root in their hearts. To the crowd he says "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone

who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise" (3:11). Tax collectors come to him asking what they should do. Tax collectors were among the most hated. They were Jewish people who worked for Rome and they would ask for more money than was required and pocket the extra. Many became rich doing this. They were notoriously corrupt, not only because of their greed but also for their cooperation with the oppressive Roman Empire that occupied the land. John the Baptist tells them to "Collect no more than the amount prescribed" (3:13). He tells them to deal honestly regardless of what was commonly practiced among tax collectors. Soldiers also came to him, and it seems like they sometimes abused their power, so when they ask what they should do John tells them to "not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and [to] be satisfied with [their] wages" (3:14). This is very real and practical day to day advice. If we are going to live lives preparing for the coming of God, then we need to live examined lives. We need to know our weaknesses and take the time to fix our gaze on Christ and imitate him.

Commentary Links for this Passage:

- *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*
- *Abingdon New Testament Commentary - John's ministry*

December 23, 2018 – Fourth Sunday in Advent

Luke 1:39-55

The mother of Jesus has had a particularly important place in Christianity. Tradition tells us that when Luke was writing his gospel he interviewed Mary, among others. Mary receives high praise in Scripture. The angel Gabriel comes to her saying, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you" (Lk 1:28). At seeing Mary her cousin "Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!'" (Lk 1:41-42). Recognizing her favored status Mary proclaims, "from now on all generations will call me blessed" (Lk 1:48). We find Mary's presence throughout the gospels. She created the context for Jesus' first miracle in John when he turned water into wine (Jn 2). At the cross Mary is there with John as Jesus declares her his mother, and John her son. She is present with the disciples after the resurrection as well. She seems to also be at the end of the Bible in Revelation chapter 12 where Mary seems to be referred to (Rev 12:1-2). And every week in worship Mary is mentioned in our creed as we proclaim Jesus as "born of the virgin Mary". Evidence of devotion to Mary goes back to the 3rd and 4th centuries, but based on paintings in Roman catacombs it probably goes back even earlier. Mary is so important because her "yes" to God's plan is seen as undoing Eve's "no" to God in the garden. Through her "yes" Mary provides a way for the savior to enter into the world.

Both Orthodox and Catholics see Mary as the prototype of the Church and as the ideal Christian. Through her cooperation with God's plan Christ dwells in her womb. Likewise, as we cooperate with God we receive Christ's presence in our hearts. As protestants, our honouring of St. Mary is lower key. Most modern protestants question the Catholic and Orthodox devotion to Mary as being embellished, superstitious, or as not having much of a biblical basis. However, the fact remains that for major branches of the Christian family, and for the vast majority of Christian history, there has been serious devotion to Mary.

I think this is such a strong tradition that it should challenge those of us with protestant leanings. At the very least we should have the utmost respect for Mary, and take the time to meditate on her as a model disciple who was willing to risk her own comfort and safety to follow God's lead into an unknown future. Mary is a powerful symbol of the way God brings the Kingdom of God to earth. God works through the powerless. ... Think of Moses with a speech impediment asked to confront Pharaoh and lead the people out of slavery. Think of the little shepherd boy David going to battle against Goliath. ... When God announces this most important moment in history, God brings the message to the world through a woman. According to the early Jewish historian

Josephus, women at this time and in this culture were not even considered reliable witnesses in a court of law. In the eyes of the world, Mary is a very ordinary woman. However, God's message of the coming kingdom is given to this young woman. ... God doesn't give the news to the Roman Emperor. God doesn't give the news to a king, or to one of the temple's high priests. God doesn't put up billboards, or go on CNN. The first to really grasp God's Good News is a young pregnant woman. Mary would have vanished into the mists of time except for being drawn into an extraordinary story. It is a very strange way for God to make an announcement that will change the world forever.

God's plan is to turn the world upside-down. In Mary's song we hear about the lifting up of the marginalized and the lowering of the powerful (Luke 1:51-53). Mary sings about the God who saved a group of slaves from the powerful Egyptian nation and chose those slaves to bear His name. Mary sings of God who scatters the proud, who lowers powerful rulers, who raises up the lowly, who feeds the hungry, and turns away those who allow their fellow human beings to go hungry when they have plenty. This is a message that turns the world upside down. The high are brought low and the low are brought high, the first will be last and the last will be first.

Mary, in her weakness and emptiness, is made a conduit of power. Mary, who has no ability to produce a child on her own since she is a virgin, is given a child by God. ... When we recognize our own emptiness, it is then that we are able to be used powerfully by God. God works through us not in our strength, but in our weakness. God doesn't work so much by leading an army, but by carrying a cross.

Mary's song is known as the Magnificat. Its power and implications were realized by the Guatemalan Government during the 1980's when they banned speaking it in public. It was banned because it was seen as encouraging rebellion and a danger to the powerful and oppressive state. Isn't that fascinating? The song of a young pregnant woman is a danger to the state? I think the Guatemalan Government of the 1980's actually has a grasp of Mary's song that we sometimes miss in the church. Guatemala is not the only place that this has become banned- It was banned in Argentina when mothers rose up to cry for justice for their missing family members in the 1970's. During the British rule of India in the 19th century, the Magnificat was banned from being sung in churches. The Magnificat is a threat to tyranny because tyrants want to feel powerful and in control, and they often treat the people like cattle who exist only for the benefit of the tyrant. ... Mary's song says otherwise. Her song says that the oppression of the poor is not the will of God and that when God's kingdom arrives fully the tyrants will have no power. The power of the Magnificat is the revealing of the truth that God picks sides and if you are a tyrant you will find yourself standing against God ... and you will not win that fight.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who faced the Nazis and was executed by them, said the following about the Magnificat: "The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings. This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind." (A sermon in Advent 1933)

This song is a call for justice and resistance that trusts in God and the inevitable arrival of His kingdom through Jesus, even in the face of oppressive and unjust governments. Obviously, it is a project that is not finished yet. There is more to do. We are still waiting for the time when the kingdom of Christ will fully envelop us. The theologian David Bentley Hart says, "If the teachings of Christianity were genuinely to take root in human hearts- if indeed we all believed that God is love and that we ought to love our neighbours as ourselves- we should have no desire for war, should hate injustice worse than death, and should find indifference to the sufferings of others impossible".

Commentary Links for this Passage:
New Interpreter's Bible Commentary

December 30, 2018 – Christmas 1

Colossians 3:12-17

We read in our Gospel lesson that Jesus “increased in wisdom and in years”. He sits in the temple among the teachers and is asking questions and giving answers. He is participating in learning the ways of the Law. There was a development in Jesus. He learned. His character developed. Jesus is at about the age when Jewish boys have their Bar Mitzvah. It is a time when they are considered to make a transition from boyhood to manhood. There is an expectation that not only will people grow older physically, but their character will develop. They will become wiser. They will develop virtue.

Sanctification is the process of becoming holy. Sometimes it is called “Theosis”, which means becoming like God. Sometimes it is called “transformation” or “spiritual formation”. We might also talk about “discipleship”, which means something like “apprentice”. They all mean basically the same thing. It means we grow and develop into the people God is hoping we will become. For some time I have been reflecting on a statement by a Christian teacher named Dallas Willard. He said that we have somehow come to the idea that we can be Christians without being disciples. That being a Christian is just a kind of label we attach to ourselves. Those who are really serious Christians, well they are the ones who are into discipleship, which involved bible study, prayer, and other spiritual disciplines that help to shape our character. But, somehow we got the idea that this isn’t for all Christians, only for those Christians who are really very serious. Dallas Willard will point out that the word “Christian” is very rare in the Bible, but the word “disciple” occurs very often. Disciple implies learning. It implies an apprentice learning from a master. So we are expected to grow and develop in our spiritual lives.

The overall goal of God’s mission is to bring human beings back into relationship with Him. Part of the restoration of this relationship is the restoration of the human being to holiness. We read in the Old Testament the command “be holy for I am holy” (Lev 19:2; 20:7) and it is quoted in the New Testament in Peter’s first letter (1 Pet 1:14-16). In 1 Timothy 4:7 we read “Train yourself in godliness”. It is said in many different ways but it is all over the New Testament. We are to be a holy people.

Jesus dealt with sin on the cross and so there is a way in which we are considered holy as we accept what was done for us by Jesus. But that’s just the beginning. When we accept what Jesus did we also accept a way of life. We cannot accept Jesus as our master and Lord and then ignore what he and his Apostles taught. Through these

teachings, the life of the community, and the presence of the Holy Spirit we are invited to grow in holiness. God is holy and human beings are originally made in the image of God, so the restoration of the image of God in a human being is also a restoring of holiness. The Church hasn't always been very good at helping people this way. Sometimes the church has become a club and forgotten about its deeper call. This means that we are often left not really sure about what this training in holiness looks like- that is when we are Christians, but (strangely) not disciples.

In our reading from the letter to the Colossians, Paul implies that our intention and focus matter. He uses many words that are about our action. Holiness isn't something that happens to us as we passively sit back. Holiness happens as we do what Paul is saying- "clothe yourselves" (3:12); "Bear with one another... forgive" (3:13); "let the word of Christ dwell... teach and admonish... sing" (3:16); "give thanks" (3:17). These are all things Paul is telling us to do. It involves our choices and our actions. Our decisions matter. We will not become holy by accident, or outside of our own decisions. We have to Intend to. We have to plan for it. We have to work at it.

We need to be very intentional about what is causing the shaping. If we don't decide, then there are forces in our world that will decide for us and they will begin shaping our souls. As disciples, we are apprentices learning from our master, Jesus. He teaches us how to live. We imitate him. We "put on Christ". We try to have our mind match the mind of Christ (Phil 2:5). We allow the "word of Christ to dwell in us" (Col 3:6). We imitate Christ's forgiveness. In our passage today we read, "Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive" (3:13). This sounds a lot like forgive us as we have forgiven, from the Lord's Prayer. So our transformation is into becoming more Christ-like.

In our Colossians reading, Paul uses the symbolism of baptism. In the early days when a person was baptized they would have taken off their old clothes and then gone into the water to be baptized. When the person came out they would have been given a white robe. The robe a priest wears is symbolic of this kind of a garment. A priest puts on the garment of a baptized person. It is white to symbolize being washed and made clean. Paul uses these ritual actions to make a spiritual point. Before our reading (Col 3:1-11), Paul talks about all the things we take off- the old garment: "sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry." (3:5-) ... he goes on- "anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk... [lying], seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator" (3:8-10). Paul is describing all these things as a garment. He tells us to get rid of the old garment, the old self, the non-Christian, non-

baptized self. And now he's going to tell us to put on the new garment- the new self, the Christian, baptized garment. He tells us, "clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" (3:12). He is describing what a baptized, Christian life is supposed to look like. He is describing the clothing of a disciple of Jesus.

Paul gives particular emphasis to love in our reading. That is really the overarching character trait he is speaking about. All the things he described before (compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience) are really what love looks like as it encounters the community (1 Cor 13). Once in a while I bump into people who say, "well I don't have to go to church to be a Christian" and I guess I get what they are saying, but then I wonder how they are learning the things we have just described. When we are forced into community with people different than us- different temperaments, different incomes, different generations, then our training as disciples has a particular edge to it. That would be more difficult to find outside the church.

Commentary for this Passage:

Abingdon New Testament Commentary on Chapter 3