

Synod Conversation with Luke

Reading Schedule – Part 4

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| Chapter 16 | July 14-20 July 21-27 | (Luke 16:1-13) (Luke 16:14-31) |
| Chapter 17 | July 28-August 3 August 4-10 | (Luke 17:1-19) (Luke 17:20-37) |
| Chapter 18 | August 11-17 August 18-24 | (Luke 18:1-17) (Luke 18:18-43) |
| Read through the whole Gospel: August 25-31 | | |
| Chapter 19 | September 1-7 September 8-14 | (Luke 19:1-27) (Luke 19:28-48) |
| Chapter 20 | September 15-21 September 22-28 | (Luke 20:1-26) (Luke 20:27-47) |

Sample Questions that could be used every week:

- What caught your eye or your ear?
- Did you notice or hear anything new?
- Are there any words or phrases in this text that are very familiar to you?
- Were you reminded of a hymn by these words?
- Did anything here make you feel joyful or sad or angry or confused? Why?
- How does this text shape your life?

Weekly Questions:

Chapter 16

Luke 16:1-13

- **Adults:** In v. 10, Jesus links faithfulness in small things with faithfulness in large matters. Can you think of examples of small ways in which you are or are not faithful? Does that have an impact of the larger matters in your life?
- **Adults:** Jesus tells his disciples they can't serve God and wealth. (v. 13) What does it look like to serve wealth? Do you find anything in a lifestyle of having and tending wealth that is incompatible with a life of faith?
- **Youth:** What does it mean to server two master? How would this create problems of you? Do you ever feel like this and if so what did or do you do?
- **Kids:** In Luke 16:12 what are the two masters Jesus is speaking of?

Luke 16:14-31

- **Adults:** Verse 31 sounds like the punch line of a good story or joke. Not everyone "gets" punch lines. Who is most likely to "get" this punch line, that if they don't believe Moses and the prophets, they won't believe even if someone rises from the dead? Might it be the early Christians who first read this Gospel? Do you "get it"?
- **Adults:** The Bible uses the word "abomination" to indicate something so seriously wrong that it is incompatible with a life of faith. What, do you think, is called an abomination in v. 15? What is it that people prize?
- **Youth:** How should have the rich man acted in life? Who are the Lazarus in life?
- **Kids:** How was Lazarus treated at the gate by the rich man?

Chapter 17

Luke 17:1-19

- **Adults:** Do mulberry trees (v. 6) uproot themselves and sail off to be planted in the sea when you tell them to? If not, does that mean that your faith is smaller than the size of a mustard seed? Does thinking about this make you feel sad or relieved?
- **Adults:** Wait a minute! Read verses 7-8. Do you remember what Jesus said in 12:37? How do you hold these things together?
- **Youth:** What was the importance that only the Samaritan came back to Jesus?
- **Kids:** How many of lepers thanked Jesus for being healed?

Luke 17:20-37

- **Adults:** In verse 32, Jesus says, “Remember Lot’s wife.” Do you remember the story he’s referring to? Find and read Genesis 19:12-29. What is wrong, do you think, in looking back when fleeing for your life? Might the same thing be true about pursuing goals?
- **Adults:** Verses 22-37 are an example of apocalyptic literature in the Gospel of Luke. Are you interested in learning about how to understand the apocalyptic literature found in the Bible? If so, Bishop Kusserow has written a guide especially for our synod’s study of Luke and it can be found as the appendix of this document (page 6).
- **Youth:** What Does it mean for the “kingdom of God is among you”?
- **Kids:** What two persons for the Jewish scriptures does Jesus name in these verses?

Chapter 18

Luke 18:1-17

- **Adults:** What do you feel in your heart when you read about Jesus blessing the little children? (vv. 15-16) Are you happy for them? For their parents? What do you think it means when Jesus says the kingdom of God belongs to little children? Is there anything of a little child still in you?
- **Adults:** Verse 8 seems to indicate that having faith is the whole point of the parable that opens this chapter. Is faith the same thing as not losing heart? Is faith the same thing as praying always? How would you describe what faith is?
- **Youth:** What is a Pharisee? Why does it seem like Jesus is always talking to them or about them?
- **Kids:** In Luke 18:15 who does Jesus invite to come to him? Why does Jesus do this?

Luke 18:18-43

- **Adults:** At the very end of this chapter, Peter points out that he and the other disciples had left their homes to follow Jesus. What have you left to follow Jesus? What have you received through following him?
- **Adults:** When Jesus tells his disciples about what he is about to face in Jerusalem, they did not understand. (18:31-34) In fact, what Jesus said was hidden from them. Does it make you uncomfortable to read this? Why? Or why not?
- **Youth:** Who was told to be silent by the crowds? Why did they want him to be silent? How and who do we silence today?
- **Kids:** What can you do to be saved? How are you saved?

Chapter 19

Luke 19:1-27

- **Adults:** In verse 9, Jesus calls Zacchaeus a son of Abraham. Do you recall that earlier in Luke Jesus called someone a daughter of Abraham? (See 13:16) What do you think being called a child of Abraham means? (You might also turn to 3:8 as you think about this.)
- **Adults:** For a deep dive into why the blind man in Jericho might have called Jesus the “Son of David,” read II Samuel 19:9-20:22. In this text, we find King David making his way back to Jerusalem along the same route Jesus is currently walking. Look ahead to Luke 20:41-44. What might these verses tell us about the conversations people were having about the Messiah at the time of Jesus?
- **Youth:** Why do you think even when Jesus told the disciples what was going to they were still did not understand?
- **Kids:** What did Zacchaeus tell Jesus he would do?

Luke 19:28-48

- **Adults:** Considering v. 42, what, exactly, do you think are the “things that make for peace”? Do you see anyone doing those things today? Are you?
- **Adults:** Verse 47 tells us about a most extraordinary few days in which Jesus taught in the temple, and people came to listen to him. Luke 21:37-38 mentions the same thing. If these verses serve as brackets, or bookends, then all the things Jesus taught between 19:47 and 21:38 belong to that remarkable context. Think about what it must have been like to hear Jesus teaching in the temple as you read through chapters 20 and 21 over the next four weeks.
- **Youth:** What does verses 43 and 44 say in your words? Is this foreshowing of the things to come?
- **Kids:** What where the people doing that made Jesus angry?

Chapter 20

Luke 20:1-26

- **Adults:** Luke uses a pattern of reflections that tie the first chapters of his Gospel to the last. Jesus' reference to John the Baptist in v. 4 brings one of these to our attention. (Look back to 1:78-79 and to 19:37-38.) What do these verses tell you Jesus might have had in mind as he makes reference to John to answer a question about his own authority?
- **Adults:** Compare 20:13 and 3:22 for another example of reflections that hold the beginning of the Gospel of Luke to the ending. What one word ties these verses together? Jesus tells the parable of the vineyard during Holy Week while sitting in the temple. Does this help make the story of his baptism more compelling for you?
- **Youth:** After read the parable in 9-17, who is the land owner, who are the slaves sent from the land owner, who are the tenants, and who is the son?
- **Kids:** How many visitors did the land owner send why did he send so many?

Luke 20:27-47

- **Adults:** What do you think heaven is like? The question that the Sadducees brought to Jesus (vv. 27-32) implies that people thought life "in the resurrection" would be pretty much like life here and now. How does Jesus' answer change that assumption? What changes in our lives if death is no longer a threat?
- **Adults:** Jesus asks a pair of questions in vv. 41-44. Psalm 110:1 is the Scripture passage he is making reference to. Think back to Luke's story of Jesus as a boy sitting in the temple asking questions about Scripture. (2:46-51) Whose son is Jesus? What difference does it make if he is or is not David's son?
- **Youth:** What in your life is Gods? What in your life is the Governments?
- **Kids:** What is a denarius?

A Guide to Reading the Apocalyptic Passages in Luke

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Our Bible is a collection of sixty-six books in which several different kinds of writing can be found.

We find poetry, for example, in the Psalms. Not the kind of poetry that rhymes at the end of each line, but an ancient style of poetry that repeats each thought twice to give it more depth. You know how looking at something with two eyes gives much greater perspective than with one eye only. This kind of poetry is like that.

I and II Chronicles read like a history text book. These books are filled with kings and armies and the places where historic battles were fought. We almost expect to find a quiz at the end!

The Gospel of Luke that we are reading together as a synod this year reads like an historical novel. The book relates actual events from a narrator's point of view, roughly in chronological order, with a clear beginning and end to the story. So it can be a little jarring, suddenly, within this style of writing, to come across a passage that takes the form of apocalyptic literature. Luke 17:22-37 is one example. Chapter 21 is another.

In Luke 17:22-37 we overhear Jesus teaching his disciples, but the language is alarming, and is focused on some specific point in the future that is not clearly defined. Jesus makes reference to ancient stories of calamity (a great flood and what sounds like a volcanic explosion), and he answers the disciples' specific question, "Where, Lord?" with the uncomfortable image of vultures gathering around a dead body.

A passage like this found within the narrative of Luke can be very difficult to understand. Recognizing that it is a different style of writing is the first step in helping the reader or listener to make sense of it. Here's one way to think about it: a few years ago murder mysteries that included recipes in the text became popular. *Killer Pancake*, by Diane Mott Davidson, is an example. A recipe is a very different kind of writing than a murder mystery, so when instructions for making food

suddenly appear in the text of the thriller, the reader is expected to recognize the different style of writing immediately.

It helps, of course, that the publisher makes the recipe visually distinct from the rest of the text on the page, complete with a title and the kind of line spacing that suits a recipe. It would help the reader of the Gospel of Luke if the examples of apocalyptic literature in chapters 17 and 21 were set apart from the rest of the narrative in a distinct way that our eyes could see, but that has not regularly been the pattern of printing Bibles, and so while reading through Luke, we run right into this very different kind of literature without realizing what has happened. If we don't recognize the difference, we can be troubled and confused.

See if your Bible doesn't do a better job with this sort of thing at Philippians 2:6-11. In the middle of St. Paul's letter to the saints in Philippi you may find the text suddenly taking the appearance of poetry. That's a visual clue that helps the modern reader understand that St. Paul is quoting an ancient hymn here. We believe that the Christian communities who first heard St. Paul's letter read to them would have recognized the hymn, and would have realized right away that its words were to be heard as distinct from the rest of Paul's letter to them.

The Christian community that first used St. Luke's Gospel, we think, would also have recognized immediately that the passages in Luke we find difficult (Luke 17:22-37, and also portions of chapter 21) are a different kind of writing placed within the predominant narrative style of the Gospel. Apocalyptic literature was a familiar and popular style of writing in Christian communities for the first two hundred years of the Church's history. But readers today usually need help to recognize the apocalyptic style of writing in Holy Scripture and to "get" what it means. I am hoping that this brief essay helps.

Apocalyptic literature is named using the Greek word for "reveal" or "disclose." You may already be aware that the book of Revelation is sometimes called *The Apocalypse*. "Revelation" and "Apocalypse" are the English and Greek words, respectively, for the same meaning – a style of writing meant to disclose God's good purpose by interpreting mysterious or traumatic events in the past, present, or future. This style of writing uses symbolism and code language to convey meaning to those who can understand it.

Speaking of code language, there is an excellent small commentary on Revelation by Bruce Metzger called *Breaking the Code*, in which the author helps modern readers understand the symbolic language that we believe was more accessible to the early Christian communities than it is to us. In his introduction, he notes:

Apocalypses usually contain predictions about the final outcome of human affairs, focusing on the last age of the world, when good will

triumph and evil will be judged. Present troubles are represented as “birth pangs” that will usher in the End. God has set a limit to the era of wickedness and will intervene at the appointed time to execute judgment. In the final battle the powers of evil, together with the evil nations they represent, will be utterly destroyed. Then a new order will be established, when the End will be as the Beginning, and Paradise will be restored.¹

Did you notice how that quotation was set apart visually from the rest of this guide? You can see at a glance that I have included a portion of another bit of writing in what I am writing to you. It is possible that in chapter 17, St. Luke was, in fact, “quoting” a resource available to him when he wrote his Gospel – a collection of Jesus’ sayings written in the apocalyptic style. St. Luke tells us that he did a lot of research before writing his Gospel (see Luke 1:3), which most likely included talking with eye-witnesses and reading written accounts of Jesus, almost certainly including the Gospel of St. Mark, and most probably including other accounts of Jesus’ teaching that have since been lost to history.

So why does Luke quote apocalyptic writing about Jesus here (and again in chapter 21)? There are two helpful answers to this question. First, the Gospels were written in a traumatic time. Christian leaders including Stephen (Acts 7:54-60) and James (Acts 12:2) had been killed, the believers were scattered (Acts 8:4), and the city of Jerusalem was besieged and overthrown by the Romans (this took place in the year 70). The apocalyptic style of writing was one way the Christian communities living through these traumatic events sought to give witness to their faith in God’s final good purpose in spite of the distress they were experiencing, so it is not surprising that St. Luke included some of that tradition in his narrative.

And secondly, within the context of the Gospel of St. Luke, beginning at 9:51, Luke invites the reader to follow Jesus as he sets his face to go to Jerusalem. The closer Jesus gets to Jerusalem, the more tense the narrative becomes, anticipating the trauma of his suffering and death there, a matter he spoke openly about with his disciples (9:22, 9:44 and 18:31). The whole narrative of St. Luke’s Gospel narrows through these chapters to focus solely on the traumatic event of Jesus’ passion, so it is not surprising that we find the apocalyptic style of writing finding its way into the narrative at this point.

Remember that apocalyptic writing is designed to bear witness to God’s good purpose in the most difficult situations of life. So while the passages in Luke 17:22-37 and chapter 21 are disturbing to read, notice these points of confidence that this style of writing brings to Luke’s narrative:

¹ Bruce M. Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation*, Abingdon Press, 1993, p. 18.

- While the stories of the flood (17:27) and the destruction of Sodom (17:29) recall times of great destruction, both stories also recall the mercy of divine rescue.
- In 17:24, Jesus declares that his coming will not be a secret, hidden thing that only a few people will discover, but will be as visible as the lightning that flashes from one end of the sky to the other.
- “Do not be terrified,” 21:9 instructs; because, as 21:18 declares, “not a hair of your head will perish.”
- And perhaps most astoundingly, precisely when things look the worst (21:20-27), Jesus teaches his disciples to “stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Apocalyptic literature focuses the attention of the reader the same way that a conversation between friends changes when one says to the other, “Look at me.” We might think of these passages in Luke as the author wanting to make eye contact with us. In these moments, through this arresting style of writing, Luke takes hold of the shoulders of his audience, looks into our eyes, and says as clearly as anywhere in his Gospel, “Look! The world is falling apart, and your life will bear great difficulty. But do not be afraid, Jesus has saved you, and his mercy will hold you to the end.”