



Interpreting Luke’s Theodicy for Fearful Christians

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What is the connection between Luke’s narrative and the lives of those who interpret his theodicy today? The answer seems fairly obvious: fear. Christians today live in a nation that is afraid. The Vietnam War shattered, once for all, our long-standing confidence in American invincibility. Old people are fearful for their promised protection under Social Security. Young people are afraid that their college degrees will not ensure a good job. Middle-aged managers and teachers fear that their positions will be eliminated. Unionized workers realize that global economic competition can overwhelm even the giants of American industry and wipe out their employment. Economies are failing world-wide, and suspended over all these fears is the dread of the bomb. A whole generation has grown to adulthood knowing the precarious vision of a peace maintained by the fear-filled tactic of nuclear deterrence.

Church leaders are fearful and anxious, too, as memberships decline and the church’s influence seems to dwindle in our cities and towns.

If we are afraid, so was the writer of Luke-Acts. His world was threatened, uncertain, unravelling. Whether he was Jewish or not, he identified himself with this defeated, divided people. The shame which they felt as a vanquished populace was symbolized by the destruction of the Temple. Luke’s writing is a gospel for a fearful people.

Americans, who have agonized over their terrible losses in Vietnam, can understand what it must have meant for Jews to wonder if their losses were in vain. Having lost so much, how can one have hope, and how can one move on into the future having lost all that is familiar? Has God abandoned this people? These anxious questions can just as easily haunt believers today, and they were never far from those who lived in the ancient world.

Writers who were contemporaries of Luke frequently published theodicies aimed at defending the justice of the gods when the vicissitudes of history seemed to undermine believers’ confidence in divine wisdom. Perhaps all attempts to interpret history as somehow coherent could be called “theodicies,” but the ancient historians were especially candid in their attempts to “justify the ways of God” within the harshness of human history. Luke has adopted many features of that literary genre.

Theodicy, as a literary effort, is full of risks. While few of us would hazard a bold theological interpretation of America’s plight in Vietnam, for example, most of us have heard radio preachers rush into that topic with complete abandon, totally assured that they had the right texts for proving what God has been doing among the nations of the world and what God is now commanding us to do. The example of electronic evangelists has been sufficient warning about the

pitfalls of theodicy. But when Christians are fearful, they are receptive to theodicy.

Luke's two-volume work is primarily a theological interpretation of public events (a "public theology"), and its aim is to persuade a vanquished people that, in spite of their losses, there is historical reason for hope. The literary vehicle for making this argument is not a homily, not a religious tract, not a spiritual pep-talk. Luke adopts the familiar mode of the historical theodicy, but with some twists. And the peculiar twists which Luke employs keep his theodicy from being the sort of triumphalistic preaching so annoyingly prevalent within the electronic religious establishment. In short, this theodicy is neither a proposal for a triumphant Christian empire to overthrow Caesar, nor a call for divine retribution against Rome for the destroyed Temple.

Luke's theodicy, his justification of God's way in a fear-filled world, is more subtle, but it is a "public theology" nonetheless.

I. THE DRAMATIC CONFLICT ESSENTIAL TO INTERPRETING LUKE

Preaching from Luke's theology of history will tax the imagination of all who try to match the subtlety of this literature. The crushing fears of people today can exert great pressure on preachers to rush too quickly to simple, direct answers about God's presence in their lives. A privatized religion may help people feel better by turning them inward, but Luke's account does not support privatized religion. It points to public events. An otherworldly postponement of hope is little better, for if there is no sign of hope now, if all the signs of the times point to God's abandonment of the world, then there is no reason, and no historical ground, for hope.

Luke's account helps us to read the signs of the times from a different perspective so that hope is empirical, based on genuine events of history, but of course it is history construed differently than it might appear from the imperial palace, or from the White House, or from the Kremlin. Luke does not read—or construe—history as Caesar might. Nor does Luke read history with the spectacles of apocalyptic distress. Luke is afraid because of what he sees, but what he proposes is not a desperate faith for apocalyptic times. He proposes that we look again, look more closely at what is happening. And so, in chapters 9 to 19 he writes a catechism, perhaps confident that those who are familiar with the Scriptures will recognize that it is directly patterned after Deuteronomy 1-26. During Pentecost, Christians are led through a season of teaching, of catechism, but a catechism skillfully and deliberately fashioned to help one another to learn how to read history in a different light, or with different spectacles.

There is high drama in Luke's catechism. He knows how to make important historical points with stories. Can this drama be recovered in our ministry? Our teaching and our preaching will be flat, limp, and boring if they lack the dramatic conflict so characteristic of Luke's narrative history. Ministers will do well if they dare to risk some conflict and tension in their presentation of these texts, and that would mean that they deliberately intensify the conflict which people's fears arouse in them today, and that they resist rushing to ease their hearers into some kind of existential or private faith that is immune from the

terror hanging over the world. The subtlety of Luke's interpretation of history will likely be lost if interpreters avoid the risk of theodicy and too quickly hurry to soothe the fears of people with a

non-dialectical reading of God's presence in the affairs of history.

We can assume that Luke's readers knew the Scriptures. For them it was not so strange to speak of God as the chief agent in all human history, public and private. What *was* strange was this new unexpected history which had come upon them and raised the ante. What could recent events mean? The conflict here is between familiar faith in God who had elected Israel, and the unfamiliar and frightening new events: the resurrection of a crucified Messiah and the destruction of the Temple. These events were so startlingly new that the old familiar faith in the promise of God had either to be re-interpreted or else these strange events were something totally other than the fulfillment of God's promise.

That is exactly the conflict which we have to introduce into the minds of today's Christians if we are to recover Luke's way of reading history: either we have to re-interpret much that is conventionally believed about God as an ever-present factor in history or else we have to assume that God has absolutely nothing to do with a world that is so clearly out-of-control.

II. LUKE'S READING OF HISTORY AS CENTERED IN JESUS

Luke takes up the challenge of re-interpreting God's way of ruling in the world. His re-interpretation does not repudiate the ancient faith, nor does it deny that God is involved in the shocking events of public history. As we might expect, the metaphor best suited for speaking of God's way of ruling in the world of public affairs is the metaphor of politics. Specifically that would mean for Luke's time kings and emperors, kingdoms and empires. To employ such terms was as open to misunderstanding at that time as the use of Marxist language is today. Is the rule of God *literally* like that of an earthly king? Are Christians to suppose that there are political advantages for believers? Public theology raises just such risky, misleading questions.

How does Luke score his points even though he risks making Christianity appear to be the literal political rival of earthly kings, and risked also the zealous misinterpretation by some Christians ever since that God had elected the church to inherit the throne of Caesar or to prevail in American civil order?

In this Central Section, especially, Luke compels the reader to move at a fast pace. Keeping up with Jesus in Luke's narrative is demanding. But that is just the point: if one is to know how Luke is coaching his readers in the subtle discipline of interpreting public history, the maxim is this: "Keep your eye on Jesus." The section opens at 9:51 with the words, "When the days drew near for him to be received up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." And we're off and running. Like Gandhi's march to the sea, or Martin Luther King's march to Selma, this procession rivets the reader's attention in such a way that everything else that might be going on in the world at this time—even in Rome—recedes into the background.

As one studies these passages in the coming weeks with a view to planning liturgies and preaching sermons, it is instructive to note Jesus' very determination, his eagerness to carry out his purpose, his single-mindedness and persistence, and then to observe how his evident determination and will are interpreted by those around him. Prophet-like persons are often the storm-center of controversy, and their determination is irksome. Thus, the village of Samaritans "would not receive him because his face was set toward Jerusalem." Perhaps if he had shown some inclination to settle in with them he would have been acceptable, but he was clearly no

provincial Messiah. They were not willing to go that far, at least not yet. Others responded to his determination with brief fits of overzealousness: “Do you want us to bid fire to come down?” His firm resolve to “get on with it” provoked strong responses from the very beginning of this mission (9:51-62, Sixth Sunday after Pentecost).

Luke’s account of Jesus’ ministry gives us the clues for discerning God’s way of ruling in the world, but not in the form of eternal or timeless verities. Luke offers no “stop action” analysis, no distilled essence of meaning. Our discernment of God’s way of ruling in the world is to follow along the way with Jesus and try to keep up with the action, to watch how things go with Jesus. We have to let Jesus set the pace and not try to tie him down in Samaria or to prevent him from pushing on to Jerusalem. As readers we are warned against trying to rush things also, as though we could call fire down from heaven.

Likewise we cannot wish for a more civilized Jesus, or a less threatening clue for God’s way in history. For example, some of the Pharisees are presented in Luke’s account as would-be friends, except that Jesus makes it hard for them to be his friends because he insists on making things more difficult for himself than they thought it necessary to be. When they warned him to *go* away and escape Herod who had grown hostile and suspicious, he retorted to his would-be friends, “No, you *go* and tell that fox, ‘Behold I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow and the third day I finish my course. Nevertheless I must *go* on my way today....’” A struggle of wills and of plans is evident here (13:31-35).

To the reader: Keep your eye on Jesus, but don’t try to stop him or push him, or give him any advice on how to be more civil so as to make it easier on himself. Some transcendent greatness has been set in motion here, and Jesus is in the center of it; indeed Jesus incarnates the compelling purpose of the universe in the very actions of his life. Here is the Word in action, and nothing can silence it or stop it.

Again, when some of the Pharisees stood in the crowds watching Jesus enter Jerusalem, and observed how he was welcomed by the multitudes with shouted passages from the Psalms, naming him the King who comes in the name of the Lord, these friendly Pharisees caution him to curb the enthusiasm of his disciples lest they attract too much attention from the authorities and bring woe down on him. But Jesus says to them, “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out” (19:42). Even if the multitudes were silenced, the whole creation would cry because nothing now can stop up what has been, at last, let loose.

III. THE THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM: THE WILL AND THE POWER OF GOD

We preachers today might well imagine ourselves in the place of those Pharisees trying to be “helpful” to Jesus. Like ours, the world of the Pharisees was a very unsettled, fearful, threatened place. The last thing in the world Jerusalem needed was one more piece of trouble, one more agitation, one more disturber of the peace masquerading as a saviour but in actual practice arousing hostility among the Roman authorities, and stirring up impossible expectations among the multitudes. But Jesus would not “take it easy” and so it was inevitable, necessary, that what was set in motion by Jesus would run its course, and what lay ahead must have seemed, to those Pharisees who were watching, like some great black hole in history whose pull was sucking them all, like it or not, into its orbit. Even the opposition, now, could not avoid exposure and confrontation.

Most of us with responsibilities in the church are probably like the Pharisees. We like to see things go well, not badly. But watching Jesus ride into town must have made those observers wince, knowing, as they must have known, how precariously balanced the worldly conditions were, and what this intrusion by an “outsider” was bound to do. And what Jesus said to them about the very stones crying out must have given them a sickening sensation: Yes, it is already too late. This Jesus has already pulled the pin, unstopped the cork, unlocked the floodgates—and soon will come the deluge, and even the Temple veil will be rent in two.

Much of the consummate literary subtlety of Luke’s rendering of the history of Jesus within the history of the world is found in his treatment of historical “necessity” (cf. 13:33; 17:25; 21:9; 22:37; 24:7, 26, 44). Luke’s theodicy is distinguished, ever so subtly, from that of the historians, poets, and philosophers of his time who also used the language of history as they, too, tried to justify what the gods were doing within the tangled events of human history. The determination of Jesus to get on with it aroused a variety of responses in Luke’s story, but Jesus resists attempts to dissuade him. “Nevertheless I must go...” (13:33). It is necessary that I go. Here is no wooden, mechanical treatment of “necessity.” History is not a pre-programmed machine, nor is history the dangling toy of fickle puppeteer deities. Nor does Luke construe history as an abandoned wreckage, bereft of all purpose and forsaken by transcendent Will. Luke assumes that God, who has always been worshipped by the now humiliated Jewish people, still rules over history, but *how* we are to interpret God’s will and power in public events is Luke’s distinctive contribution to the literary genre of theodicy. Luke’s testimony to God’s purpose and plan still surprises us with its profound trust in the face of bitter realities. Jesus is the indispensable key by which to unlock the mystery of how God’s way works itself out in world history.

The link, then, between Jesus *in* history and God the ruler *of* history is the will of God to which Jesus, in obedience, is bound. Jesus lives in a world that is often precarious, and the fabric of history is woven of the criss-crossing of countless wills, purposes, influences, and inherited facts. Even when history seems to be utterly controlled by oppressive forces, it is still open, indeterminate. But the will of God is determined. God, in other words, is fixed on God’s own purpose:

the liberation of humanity. God has set God’s will, and it has been manifest in this story which Luke tells. It is not the story of the super-powers in Caesar’s Rome but the story of the manger-born baby of Bethlehem. Even Caesar’s power cannot shut down history or make the fearful safe within all its sickening uncertainties. The worship of power does not cast out fear; instead the worship of power insinuates its grip on us through fear and intimidation. God’s will, though, is not discovered by worshipping the power of Caesar. God’s will must be traced in the life of Jesus, from Bethlehem to the Cross.

Luke writes in such away that the reader must follow along, tracing the activity of Jesus against the background of Caesar’s power. The point of the narrative is that the reader might “see” that what Jesus sets in motion is precisely what God’s will has determined to be necessary. God’s determined will does work inescapably *within* history without eliminating the actual openness and indeterminacy *of* history which can still arouse fear in people. What the super-power of Caesar cannot do (cast out fear) the determined will of God manifest in Jesus is able to do.

IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERPRETING LUKE'S THEODICY TODAY

Fear is what ties together the original audience of Luke's Gospel and those for whom we interpret the gospel today. We have argued that Luke and his readers were scared because their world was unravelling. The indeterminacies of history were frightening and still are, for we are fearful, too. The foundations of the world we have known continue to shake ominously. Luke's world was out of control and so is ours, and just as Luke did not try to find some ground of hope in the power of Rome to keep the peace, neither should we. Neither *pax romana* nor *pax americana* is the hope of the world. And just as Luke did not announce Caesar's will to be the will of God, neither can we make that claim for American power. But how can Luke's gospel be preached today without telling people not to worry about the future of America's privileged way of life in the world? There are good reasons to be afraid for America. Neither God nor America has things under absolute control. The death and resurrection of Jesus did not cancel the indeterminacies of history, a truth all too evident from twenty centuries of historical ambiguity.

What frightens us most, perhaps, is the conflict between super-powers, and when we investigate the intricacies of those conflicts, we find no empirical basis for relieving our fears. When Luke investigated the balance of power in his day, he did not presume that sheer imperial might could be the basis of hope. Instead he asked the theodicy question: what is the role of God in all this? How can God's will be discerned in human history? Luke put the power-struggle in the background and turned the spotlight on the public events whose moving center was Jesus, and then Luke invited his readers to keep their eye on Jesus and see what effect the will of God has in this person whose life is characterized by his determination (he both determined and was determined) to do the will of God. The will of Jesus and the will of God are one.

In Luke's Gospel what historical or empirical effect does the will of God have when played out against the background of imperial splendor and power?

1. The will of God does not so quickly smash the earthly powers no matter how much we might want to call fire down from heaven upon them. The power of God's will is much more restrained than ours might be if we were God.

2. God's will is not in bondage to earthly powers or conventions either. The fierce determination of Jesus to be on his way to the end gave him exquisite freedom from the fear which mere power uses in order to control people. God's will embodied in the determination of Jesus exposes earthly power where it is weakest. Power can elicit terror in mere mortals, but it cannot earn their trust. Jesus won the trust of the people, not by any show of power (he consistently resisted such signs, 11:29, e.g.) but by his manifest determination to do the will of the Father. The freedom which Jesus' bondage to the will of God gave him was itself sufficient to win the trust of the poor. They acknowledged his authority. Authority is legitimate only when people freely bind their consciences in response to that authority.

3. When acted out in the life of Jesus, the will of God established a new order of things, or at least God's will gained a foothold in the world, and that is enough to give us empirical ground for hope. In the old order there were proscriptions against offering membership to those who were blind, lame, diseased, sexually mutilated, and others who were judged to be sinners. In Jesus' parables and actions, he specifically contradicted such exclusive lists as Leviticus 21. He set his authority against the authority of certain prevailing interpretations of the Jewish tradition.

When one traces the will of God through Luke's telling of the life of Jesus, all religious and social authorities which sanction exclusiveness are relativized. That is, God's will is unsettling to all vested interests which shut out those whom God invites to enter.

4. God's will is not to smash, but to transform, all earthly power and authority. One effect of God's will, as we trace it out in the life of Jesus, is a consistent judgment on how power is to be used in this world. Jesus is not merely submissive before power. He strides forthrightly and resolutely toward Jerusalem, stirring up along the way a tide of events which only reach their climax when he freely accepts what is decreed to be necessary: death. (Cf. 23:35-43, Christ the King Sunday, and note how the scene of Jesus' grisly death underscores the twist in the narrative—*this* "king" rules through suffering and death.) Jesus does not smash the authority or the power of those who put him to death, but by the power of his determined will he exercises a final judgment over those who have judged him and executed him.

5. Does God's will as manifest in Jesus speak to the *proper* use of power? With Jesus as the unsurpassable instance of the will and power of God, we can preach with assurance that God wills, that God is eager, to give power to the weakest. God is generous with power, even risking the envy of the older brother (15:25-32). God wills to empower those whom God loves, and only those who misunderstand, or misuse power would begrudge God's generosity. "Fear not little flock for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (12:32). God enjoys giving the power of God's way of ruling the world to all who would receive it.

6. But to receive the kingdom (or God's way of ruling in the history and lives of people) implies not the renunciation of power but the sharing of it. "Sell your possessions and give alms; provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old" (12:33).

The life of Jesus is a judgment on all uses of power, but also the life of Jesus is the measure and norm for transforming rather than destroying earthly power. All power on earth is derived from God and is to be used according to God's will for justice and human well-being. Only those who misuse their God-given power need fear the judgment of God.

Concretely, then, we trace the way of God's ruling the world by reading the life of Jesus against the background of Caesar's power. We have in Luke's literary masterpiece a different way of evaluating or construing the interaction of earthly powers which comprise the unfolding events of our often frightening history. Luke's story of Jesus therefore also furnishes us with a lens through which to read our world as well.

The true strength or power of a nation, of a community, of a family, or of a relationship, is not measured by how much fear it can generate in others for the purpose of imposing an alien will on them. The true strength of earthly power is its willingness to care for the weakest members and to empower them toward full participation. The political implications for our own nation are obvious, and must not go unnoticed in the church. And when our civil authorities refuse to use political and economic power to serve the dispossessed, it is all the more an unqualified command to the church to announce the good news by the church's own full-blown commitment to the powerless of the world. It is God's good pleasure to give to these little ones the power of the Kingdom.