



## **The Politics of God: The Way to the Cross\***

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The Gospel lessons from Luke for the end of the Pentecost season, beginning with chapter 17, comprise the last third of the travel narrative in this Gospel. These late Pentecost lessons continue the Lucan literary structure and theme of Jesus' public way to the cross. This travel narrative does not merely describe the geography and itinerary of Jesus' movements that bring him in the end to Jerusalem. The narrative rather transforms the ordinary public places and events of Jesus' ministry into the public arena where the message of the Kingdom of God is proclaimed and its meaning verified. Jesus is not just an actor performing within the limitations of a given environment. His presence on the scene draws upon the daily experiences of a people under Roman domination in order to express in word and finally his death the mystery and means of the way of the Lord.

Luke writes a theology of history based on the public events in the life of the Messiah. From the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost to Christ the King Sunday, the lessons carry forward Luke's concern to articulate a theology for life in the world. This theology does not seek after images through which to understand and affirm the inner circle of those who might see themselves as special friends of God. It is a theology shaped by external events that become the backdrop for understanding God's saving work in the world. This is not to say that the backdrop easily dissolves into the saving work. On the contrary, the backdrop is the vehicle for contrasting God's way *in* the world with the way *of* the world. In speaking about the public world, Luke wants to fix the reader's attention upon Jesus and to have his message spoken from the stage of human history. In his exposition of the earlier Lucan Pentecost pericopes, Lee Snook observes that "if one is to know how Luke is coaching his readers in the subtle

\*This installment of Texts in Context was written after an extended conversation with David L. Tiede (who provided exegetical comments on the texts), Daniel J. Simundson, both of Luther Northwestern Seminary, and Calvin J. Storley, pastor of Community of the Cross Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Minnesota.

discipline of interpreting public history, the maxim is this: 'Keep your eyes on Jesus.'"<sup>1</sup> That maxim applies equally well for the pericopes for the end of, Pentecost.

Luke's public theology is a theology of history that has Jesus as the revealer of God's will at its center, providing the anchor against misinterpreting the Kingdom of God as the kingdom of this world. Thus, in Luke's presentation, God is working decisively and singularly in Jesus. Jesus is the one who makes known the purpose of God to bring salvation to the world, and the way salvation will become a reality.

The literary structure of the gospel that tells this good news, especially in these pericopes used at the end of the Pentecost season, points unambiguously and irrevocably toward the cross. As the narrative progresses, one gets the sense of being drawn into an ever-tightening circle until there is no escape. The effect on the reader is cumulative, with one event in the life of Jesus mounting upon the next until the whole narrative is drawn together into a final statement about discipleship in the climax of chapter 23. Everything points to the crucifixion scene in the pericope used for Christ the King Sunday. There the heart of what Luke is talking about comes to expression—the discipleship of obedience to the will and purpose of God in the face of all that the world would claim. There is a sense of pathos and tragedy in this inevitable movement toward “the place which is called The Skull,” Calvary. One feels drawn into the gates of hell, into the worst of human compromise by those who most heroically did not want to compromise, namely the disciples. And then Jesus dies.

But finally, for Luke, the end is not tragedy. God is working out salvation for people living in the world here-and-now as well as in the hereafter. Luke gives the inaugural statement of the earthly program of the Kingdom of God in 4:14-30, quoting Isaiah 61:1-2, “good news to the poor...release to the captives...sight to the blind,...liberty [for] those who are oppressed.” In that very historical process, and not in spite of it or apart from it, God’s Kingdom would be revealed in Jesus’ ministry. Throughout the gospel Jesus does not wait for approval from all the people. His actions bring both rejection and expressions of faith. Ultimately, in Luke’s telling, we have the disclosure of the freedom of the Messiah and the Kingdom to work salvation in the world, as it unfolds in Jesus’ way to the cross.

#### JOURNEY’S END AND THE ENTHRONEMENT: THE DETERMINATION AND FREEDOM OF THE MESSIAH

The eight gospel lessons fall into three groups: (1) 17:1-10 and 17:11-19; (2)~ 18:1-8a, 18:9-14 and 19:1-10; (3) 20:27-38, 21:5-19 and 23:35-43.

The first two texts are paired because they are played off against each other. In 17:1-10 Luke sets forth a series of hard sayings about discipleship, hard not only because of what they say about the course of discipleship but also because of the suggestion that the disciples are not ready for what is unfolding before their eyes in Jesus. Luke gathers these sayings around the apostles’ own

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<sup>1</sup>Lee E. Snook, “Interpreting Luke’s Theodicy for Fearful Christians,” *Word & World* 3 (1983) 306.

plea, “Increase our faith!” Then in 17:11-19, on the other hand, Luke tells a story of faith, of faith found in Samaria! This pairing is not uncommon in Luke. It parallels the juxtaposition of stories of rejection and stories of faith elsewhere.

The first two texts in the second group are object lessons about the freedom of God’s way of ruling the world. As such they all speak of potential traps into which the disciples can stumble. These texts carry forward the developing theme that discipleship is not without risk or high cost. Moreover, the risk and cost are not always of the kinds that can be anticipated. Commitment to the Lord out of personal conviction is not always shaped by the realities in the mission of the Messiah. Disciples can be misled and misinformed. Though the third text in this group is the Zacchaeus narrative, it is very much of a piece with the first two texts that are parables. In reality

the trap in the Zacchaeus story is seen more clearly when this text is read in conjunction with the story of the rich ruler in 18:18-30.

The third group of texts deal with Jesus' last days, the climax of his ministry in Jerusalem. The travel narrative ends, and Jesus enters Jerusalem to encounter the final opposition as the Messiah of God. He enters the temple to teach and to rid it of the merchants, but also to claim it for the Kingdom and offer the ultimate challenge to the religious leaders. No longer is there middle ground in which to contemplate discipleship. The stakes are high. The dominion of the Lord and the dominion of the world stand as options for the people. The consequences of choosing either are decisive. The religious leaders try to draw Jesus into their final trap, Jesus gives an oracle of doom, and the Messiah is crucified.

Seeing all these texts in the light of Luke's literary structure is crucial. Only then can the details of each pericope be understood as Luke uses them, and applied out of his theological perspective. Failing that perspective the exegete and preacher can get lost in factual data that lead one far beyond Luke's intention and possibly to misreading and misunderstanding of his gospel.

#### *Pentecost 20: Faithful Discipleship, 17:1-10.*

This group of assorted sayings of Jesus on temptation, forgiveness, faith, and duty come together to focus upon discipleship. They are more than just a gathering up of isolated comments as though the evangelist wanted to be sure they would be preserved. Luke uses them to introduce the third announcement of Jerusalem as Jesus' final destination and to conclude his travel account. Luke underscores the fact that Jesus says these things to his disciples and thereby draws the eye of the reader to the uncompromising demands of discipleship.

Thus the temptations to sin are temptations having to do with *discipleship*. Lest the reader think that discipleship means "everyday and in every way getting better and better," Jesus warns that there are no perquisites for disciples in the Kingdom he brings. Discipleship will be hard and unrequiting. Nevertheless, the temptation is always there to try to make something of oneself as a disciple in order to appreciate oneself or be appreciated by others, even by God. But Jesus refuses to gild the lily of discipleship. Moreover, the greater would be the sin if one were to lead others, the "little ones," to believe that there were rewards of some kind. Though this saying about little ones (17:2) may have been

spoken originally about children, Luke uses it here to refer to disciples, as is the tendency in the early church in general.<sup>2</sup>

The capstone of discipleship is duty (17:7-10), specifically in following the way of Jesus. That way takes a direction far different from that of the world. Above all, Luke points out, it calls for unfailing forgiveness. Forgiveness is not an option for those in the community of Christ's followers. It must always be the response to repentance. Similarly, one is called to act always in faith, however minuscule or in need of strengthening one's faith might be (17:5).

Those contemplating discipleship could easily come to the conclusion, "What's the use?" The call is too demanding ever to be fulfilled. Nevertheless, there is good news in that call. Luke invites his readers to set their gaze with him on the final test of disciples where the magnitude of the mission of the Messiah is seen in Jesus' final act of duty, the cross (chapter 23). There discipleship is vindicated, as the depth of God's mercy for us is revealed.

*Pentecost 21: Healing beyond Expectation, 17:11-19.*

This pericope is most likely a traditional healing story expanded into a story of faith and, as such, becomes further commentary on discipleship in Luke's Gospel. Something more than physical healing occurs in this story.

The ten lepers are cleansed on their way to show themselves to the priests. But when the Samaritan leper, who saw that he had been healed, returned to Jesus praising God, Jesus exclaimed: "Your faith has made you well" (17:19). This exclamation, however, cannot be read as a simple equation: faith = healing, or enough faith = the kind of healing you want. The relationship of faith and healing is much deeper so that faith is, in reality, involved in the healing and not thought to be its cause.

The Samaritan was a foreigner, neither Jew nor gentile strictly speaking. His falling at Jesus' feet was evidence that the healing went beyond the leprosy. In the Samaritan's act of praise and thanksgiving to God, Jesus recognized faith. But such faith was not acclaimed as something the Samaritan had in himself. The faith of the Samaritan arose from a trusting relationship with Jesus. Here, then, was a healing of conversion, of faith in Jesus as savior, that stands out as the greater miracle. Whereas all the lepers received the miracle of physical healing, this one received something more. Luke moves from the observation that the lepers were *cleansed* to the statement that the Samaritan saw that he was *healed* (*hiaomai*) on to Jesus' affirmation, "Your faith has made you well" (*sozo*). The Samaritan connected the healing with God and came back to give God the glory.

As a foreigner, the Samaritan was one who brought none of the expectations of tradition with him. He is a sign of openness and becomes Luke's commentary on discipleship here. In contrast to the disciples in the preceding pericope (17:5), the Samaritan does not ask that his faith be increased. The disciples had wanted more faith. They thought in terms of quantity. And Jesus' reply to them was that if it is a matter of quantity, one will never have enough! The Samaritan stands among those who asked only for mercy. But the end result

<sup>2</sup>Matthew 18:10 and Mark 9:42.

was that he was made well. He was the thankful one who really came to faith. With him it was not a question of how much faith he had but *that* he had faith.

*Pentecost 22: If Such a Judge, How Much the More God, 18:1-8a.*

In this pericope and the two that follow, Jesus' teaching is directed especially toward people who easily regard themselves as faithful followers. Here Jesus reveals his freedom to act for the program of God's Kingdom, giving a lesson for those who have been ensnared by their own pride and possessions.

The judge in this parable is a negative example to reveal, by contrast, the unqualified mercy and justice of God. The judge was moved neither by mercy nor justice. It was the persistence of the widow that finally made him vindicate her, and only because she was a bother to him. The parable says that if that judge will act only because this woman is pestering him, so much the more will God act on the other side of the question of morality and "vindicate his elect...speedily" (18:7-8). The word about prayer is not that God, like the judge, can be manipulated and that, therefore, one should pray day and night. This is not a prescriptive word, or

even good advice. Rather, it is a descriptive statement about God and prayer. The good of prayer is not dependent upon the outcome. Prayer does not necessarily change things, but one continues to pray and in the act of prayer itself something is given to the one who prays. Prayer itself is vindicated.

Relationships that enslave can be snares in more ways than one. They can restrict personal freedom. But they can also dehumanize a person to the point of crippling and distorting one's awareness of the God-given freedom all people have and of neutralizing the human drive or willingness to act on that freedom.

Over against the pitfalls of enslaving relationships, this Lucan parable asserts that God is always for God's people. God is the one who can be trusted far more than any human relationship can be trusted. God is not like the malevolent judge who had to be manipulated. The end of 18:8, which does not appear in the lectionary text, makes this clear: "Nevertheless, when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?" It is faith in the presence of the faithful one that is at stake here. God's claim upon God's creatures is a justifying claim that heralds righteousness and salvation.

*Pentecost 23: Humility: An Example of Faith, 18:9-14.*

This parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector also appears only in Luke. It bears his mark as an evangelist and carries forward his literary structure. The theme of the previous pericope (in the verses immediately preceding this text) is continued here. God is free to respond to a sinner's plea for mercy with justification. God is not bound by human claims or by the expectations of religious tradition.

The matter for consideration here, as in the parable of the widow and the judge, is not morality but God's way with humankind revealed in Jesus. The parable says that any attempt to justify oneself is doomed to failure, whether one appeals to the tax collector and his humble stance before God or one disclaims any association with the Pharisee whose prayer was obviously the prayer of a self-righteous person.

Thus, this parable holds a trap that is at once obvious and precarious. The mention of the Pharisees, for most readers of the New Testament, sets the caveat. Whether rightly or wrongly, the caricature of the Pharisee often developed out of the New Testament is that of someone whose religious aspirations turned in upon oneself so that commitment to the tradition, however genuinely motivated, ended in hypocrisy. So, when the Pharisee enters the scene, one is served notice that something must be looked at with scrutiny. Furthermore, that caveat has the reverse effect of drawing one's attention to the tax collector and finally to an easy identification with him. More often than not, the sides are drawn before the parable or any discussion of it unfolds. The result is a reverse self-righteousness expressed, as the parable does it, in the form of prayer: "God, I thank thee that I am not like this Pharisee," or "God, I thank thee that I am as this humble tax collector." In either case, one begins to make one's own claim before God.

Jesus does not challenge the Pharisee's prayer or argue that the Pharisee was all those things he said he was not. Nor does Jesus laud the short prayer for mercy on the part of the tax collector. Jesus is not calling the righteousness of the Pharisee into question. When Jesus said, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance," he was not being cynical (Luke

5:32 and parallels). Jesus is not criticizing the morality of the actions and words of either the Pharisee or the tax collector, holding one up over the other. The tax collector “went down to his house justified” (18:14) because his humility was a sign of faith, not morality. In his prayer for mercy, the tax collector reveals the depths and freedom of God’s forgiving love that are not limited by the righteousness or contemptuousness of the world.

*Pentecost 24: Even a Rich Man Can Be Saved, 19:1-10.*

The Zacchaeus story is the final stroke that does away with any suspicion that Jesus has been talking about morality in the previous pericopes. If Zacchaeus were to be used as an example of morality, he would be a weird model! Zacchaeus is, under everything else one could say about him, a quisling. He is a collaborator with the Roman order whether he is collecting taxes for the temple or for the empire itself. He is not only a cheat but also a traitor to the faith of Israel. He is not a person whom the people will take seriously. They want him to look absurd. And he certainly does, sitting up there in that sycamore tree craning to see the Messiah of Israel come along.

And yet the seriousness of this whole situation for Luke is that, far from being an example of morality, Zacchaeus is an example of the freedom of the gospel. Despite what probably were normal hopes of the people, Jesus calls Zacchaeus out of the tree, invites himself to Zacchaeus’ house out of necessity, and Zacchaeus receives him joyfully. Zacchaeus, like the Samaritan of 17:11-19, trusts Jesus. He has faith in Jesus. Jesus affirms that faith, and in so doing he confirms the generosity of God’s mercy by staying in the man’s house. Contrary to what we might have expected, Zacchaeus ends up squandering everything he had amassed in his business dealings. He still thinks in terms of numbers—“half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold” (19:8). Exorbitant though those numbers be, and therefore

challenging as the numbers of thanksgiving and praise for all of us, the important thing is that Zacchaeus had a change of heart. And Jesus’ response was not to argue about numbers or about quantity either in respect to what Zacchaeus proposed or in respect to God’s mercy. Jesus simply said, “Today salvation has come to this house” (19:9). The gospel came into Zacchaeus’ house when Jesus came, and Zacchaeus had the eyes to see it. He was freed to be someone other than who he had been. Even a rich man, Luke says, can be saved!

An interesting comparison can be made between the Zacchaeus story and the story of the rich ruler (18:18-30) to highlight the trap religious people often get themselves into when confronted by the freedom of the gospel. Luke seems to play these two stories off against each other. The rich ruler needed to justify himself by knowing how much was required of him: “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (18:18). Jesus’ final response was to the effect that if the question is “How much?,” the answer is “Everything!” Though Zacchaeus proposed extravagant measures to show his change of heart, it was in response to being claimed by the freedom of the gospel. He did not ask Jesus to set any terms. And Jesus simply applauded what Zacchaeus set himself to do.

*Pentecost 25: One Last Attempt: Power against Power, 20:27-38.*

The Sadducees’ question about the resurrection points forward and backward. It points

forward in that Jesus turns this question into a claim for resurrection (20:34-38). It points backward in that it resumes questions about resurrection put to Jesus in chapter 20. This is the third such question, and all three are intended as entrapments to catch Jesus in an answer that would discredit him and thereby generate opposition to him that could be used to support the plot to kill him. The first question is about John's baptism (20:1-8) and the second is about tribute to Caesar (20:19-26). Luke uses these questions to build the contrast between the determination and freedom of the Messiah and the prescribed, legalistic way interpretations of the tradition were made to function by their supporters among the people.

Luke uses another of his symbols as he builds this contrast, namely, the people, the faithful of Israel, who hang on Jesus' words and make it impossible for the temple leadership to get rid of him. And yet, though the people get in the way, the temple leaders, the Sadducean party, are not thwarted. They are driven by one question, How can Jesus be killed? The *dramatis personae* had been identified previously (19:47-48), and the struggle unfolds with the determined insincerity of loaded questions.

In the foray between Jesus and the religious leaders, the political ramifications become more intense. The Passover was coming. Pilate would be there. The unrest this Jesus could cause became more real each time he taught the people. He had entered Jerusalem to the cries of the Hallel psalm (Ps 118:26), taught in the temple, drove out those who sold there, and spoke of the destruction of Jerusalem. There would be no way to keep all this from the Roman authorities except Jesus be stopped.

Insincerity breeds stupidity, like the question about the resurrection of the dead from the Sadducees, "who say there is not resurrection" (20:27). There seems to be only one point in their asking, to make Jesus look foolish. But the

result is that Jesus does not look foolish. His answer acknowledges the absurdity of the question, and he turns it into an argument for the resurrection with the strange use of a quotation from Exodus 3:6 and the same logic the Sadducees used against him.

Then comes a very ominous word, after the pericope, in 20:39-40. Luke says the questions were finished. Those who had asked them were done with trying to trap Jesus. No more of such games. The next strategy was the cross!

*Pentecost 26: A Time to Bear Witness, 21:5-19.*

Here is a powerfully apocalyptic statement by Jesus involving the temple and the events in the end-time. It is an oracle of doom and judgment, and one must reckon with it, given Luke's apocalyptic tendencies. And yet the exegetical question is not one that can be answered from the details of the text alone. Here again the task of the exegete is to understand the text in the broader context of Luke's perspective. This pericope reaches back to 19:41-44 where Jesus laments for Jerusalem and predicts the end: "They will not leave one stone upon another in you; because you did not know the time of your visitation" (19:44). The pericope also reaches forward to the passion where Jesus says, "Do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children" (23:28).

The real tragedy is the blindness of the temple hierarchy. The religious leadership of the people of God bring upon themselves the destruction they are trying to avert by getting rid of this

trouble-maker Jesus, this challenger to their claims and authority. The whole hierarchy of the temple wants to kill him. But if they kill the Messiah, what then? It is bad enough to kill a righteous man and worse to kill a prophet. But if they kill the Messiah, what will God do?

Luke writes after the destruction of the temple. He is remembering the predictions of Jesus. The apocalyptic language is not strictly futuristic and predictive, for his eschatology focuses on the present time (21:13). That is an important clue for understanding Luke, whether one thinks of his first readers or those of us who read his gospel today. Moreover, because Luke writes after the destruction, his eschatology may be considered more prophetic than apocalyptic. It carries forward the strong influence of the deuteronomistic theme of judgment *within* history. Luke is not appealing to some future time beyond history when vengeance would be vindicated. “The present, with all of its difficulty, is the time for witness, endurance, watchfulness, and prayer until the time of the Son of man (21:10, 19, 36).”<sup>3</sup>

For Luke, the Kingdom of the Messiah is finally not tragic. The reign of God triumphs, and the Lordship of Jesus turns out not to be weak, stupid, or a farce. It is a testimony to the way God has chosen to do things. The hope for the believers in all this is that one can stand up and declare with confidence that what is experienced in the present as the cataclysm is not the end, but only the tribulation through which one passes. Now is the time for testimony to the Kingdom. Even further, “by your endurance you will gain your lives” (21:19).

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<sup>3</sup>David L. Tiede, *Prophecy and History in Luke-Acts* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 88.

*Christ the King: The Enthronement, 23:35-43.*

The significance for Luke of the present moment, the now of history in which God is acting, comes to powerful expression in the dying words of Jesus from the cross. To the criminal who defended him and asked to be remembered when Jesus came into his Kingdom, Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (23:43). This word from the cross is only in Luke. Matthew (27:38), Mark (15:27), and John (19:18) all refer to the two others crucified with Jesus, and Matthew (27:44) and Mark (15:32) say that these others taunted him. But only in Luke does Jesus respond to the request with this striking word, “today.”

The mystery of the way of the Lord is not a matter of life beyond the present. It is grounded in the present. Salvation is not a promise for the world to come. It is tied directly to the present world in which the God of all creation brings salvation in this world through the Messiah precisely by standing in freedom over against the rulers of this world. The work of Jesus Messiah was the public work of God declaring that God intends to rule with justice in the world. Through Jesus God declared God’s dominion *in* history, not above it or beside it. God’s will is set to be realized against the ruling powers of this world. Salvation is for the now as well as for the hereafter.

The two other sayings of Jesus from the cross in Luke—and only in Luke—bring to a close his account of the earthly life of Jesus Messiah. One comes before the word to the criminal and one after it. With them Luke puts a seal on his account of the way of the Messiah in the empirical, public events of history and offers a warrant for the church that will live beyond the resurrection. “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (23:34). The final tragedy is that only Jesus understood; all the others were blind. “Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!” (23:46). The parabola of grace begins and ends with God.



So the Messiah dies, but not an ignominious death. Jesus the Messiah of God, the Chosen One, dies as king whose way to the cross was the way of God's freedom and determination set in the world. On the cross is where the liberation Jesus is working throughout his ministry finally takes place. There the Chosen One fulfills the exodus. His death is not tragic, for he does not die because he sinned. He dies because he is the righteous one who reveals the power and wisdom of God confronting the politics of the world. The paradox is that Jesus' death was his enthronement.

#### LUKE FOR OUR CONTEXT

Luke's perspective on the way of Jesus the Messiah shapes the tradition he uses so that his theology of history is a public theology expressed in the events of Jesus' ministry. The details of each gospel lesson need to be seen and interpreted in the light of that overall perspective. Luke is talking about the way the politics of God encounter the politics of the world.

In that encounter Jesus proclaims the determination and freedom of God's will to be God and work salvation in the world. God would work through the Chosen One to fulfill the mission outlined in Isaiah 61. In the will of God and in that mission of the Chosen One is the good news we preach. It is a word to the

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poor, the captive, the blind, the oppressed who need to hear not only that God cares about them but also that God works on their behalf to give them wholeness and salvation.

The mission of the Messiah is not an easy or obvious one because the liberation Jesus is working must find expression in the lives of people, dominated as they are by principalities, powers, and the conflict of worldly empires whose promises at best are fugitive.

Jesus disrupts political systems with the news of God's freedom. This disruption carries no guarantees that systems will change. In reality, the way of the Messiah and his disciples becomes harder and harder, either because those who exercise worldly rule don't understand or because they openly oppose God's freedom and determination. Jesus does not sentimentalize discipleship. It is clear that discipleship is a matter of duty in the face of the ups and downs that draw the line between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world ever more decisively.

The people in Luke's world faced uncertainties and doubts because of the world situation. So do we. Luke's world was a place where justice was for the privileged of one kind or another. And so is our world. For those first century Christians there was every reason to think that the world was finally falling apart. Those reasons are still with us today. In Luke's world the opponents of the Messiah tried to discredit him by subverting whatever was left of human discourse with insincerity and hate. And so do the opponents today.

In the face of all that, God's determination to be in history still does not render the will of worldly powers impotent. And yet, God's freedom remains to do its work of salvation among God's people now and in the age to come. That is our hope as we watch and wait, being open to God's movement in our lives as we "keep our eyes on Jesus." The way of God in the world is not a negotiated way but a way declared. The time to bear testimony to that way is always now!