



Texts in Context

The Birth of Jesus Never Saved Anyone: The Lucan Advent Texts*

MARC KOLDEN

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

The New Testament does not think salvation or the new birth occurs through Jesus' actual historical birth or through any sort of birth of Christ in us. The birth of Jesus as such is not redemptive. Redemption for the New Testament writers as well as for the early church involved principally Jesus' death and resurrection. Our rebirth is not a participation in Christ's birth but in his death and resurrection.¹ The writings of the apostle Paul and of John have been most influential here: insisting that the church is born on the cross, that the Spirit through the word and sacraments make the cross effective in us, and that our witness is to be to Christ crucified and risen.

For the evangelist Luke, the salvific focus is not only not on Jesus' birth, but it is not even primarily on Jesus' death and resurrection. Noticing this early in the year of Luke will help the preacher attend carefully to the texts and their context in preparing to preach. It will also make it clear that the Advent texts are not primarily pointing believers to Christmas (whether past or present) but to the eschatological hope as understood by Luke in light of Christ. The traditional Advent collects

*This essay was written after consultation with Pastor Janice Kibler-Melby of All Saints Lutheran Church, Cottage Grove, Minnesota, and Professors David Fredrickson and Gary Simpson of Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary.

¹The Catholic liturgical scholar Louis Bouyer makes this point very persuasively in *Life and Liturgy* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1956) 201-250.

retain this emphasis on Christ's "second coming," although the domesticated modern versions (in, for example, the *Lutheran Book of Worship*) may allow themselves to be interpreted as some sort of wish for a sentimental birth of Jesus in our hearts. Remembering the biblical hope for the coming of the kingdom of God, the destruction of the powers of sin, death, and evil, and the future manifestation of God to all flesh will help us see the overall message of the gospel according to Luke; it will also help us realize that Jesus' "first coming" at Christmas is not the focus of our hope during Advent, but is rather part of the whole season's purpose of intensifying our expectation for God's final fulfillment.²

First Sunday in Advent: Luke 21:25-36

See Luke 21:5-24 for the immediate context; the assigned text is part of the synoptic apocalypse. A glance at the parallel accounts reveals that Luke relates the frightening future more

directly to his readers (vs. 26) and that he alone closes the predictions about the coming Son of Man with a promise (vs. 28): all this means deliverance. Luke also adds his own exhortative ending (vss. 34-36), so that his readers may be able to stand when the day of judgment comes. This approach is not unusual; 1 Thess 5:1-11 says much the same thing. It is a way of reappropriating motifs of early apocalyptic eschatology without treating them as blueprints or detailed chronologies of events. Luke also seems to expand the future hope beyond the return of Christ (in Matthew and Mark) to the kingdom of God (vs. 31).

This is a passage that gives the church a “reason for hope.” The focus is not on the quality of individual faith or on one’s subjective hoping but on the faithfulness of God, who will carry out the divine redemption in spite of all appearances to the contrary. Redemption here is not thought of primarily as forgiveness of sins but as rescue from tribulation as God defeats hostile forces. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s comment fits well: Advent is like sitting in a prison cell. One cannot do anything except hope, pray, and wait; deliverance must come from the outside.³

A helpful rule for preaching is this: when you read the Bible, look for promises. In this passage we must not get lost in all the dire signs and warnings. The point of them is neither to scare us nor to lead us astray into calculating particular dates and events. Instead, “when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (vs. 28). The promise is that in these events, God’s gracious purposes are being worked out; the divine promises are being kept. Even though it may seem like the world and our lives are out of control, God’s word of promise is given to us so that we will not be drawn into despair or cynicism. And God’s word will not pass away (vs. 31—another promise).

A future hope given by the creator of the world will not lead us away from life in the present but will anchor us more firmly and faithfully within it, precisely

²This discussion of Lucan texts assumes a prior use of a synopsis or parallel version of the gospels and it depends in each instance on two commentaries: Frederick Danker, *Jesus and the New Age*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); and David Tiede, *Luke* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988). It may also be useful to consult a previous Texts in Context article on these same passages: Gracia Grindal, “Promises, Promises,” *Word & World* 8/4 (1988) 389-394.

³Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1967) 96; letter dated 21 November 1943.

because this is the place where God’s rule is promised. In the context of such a hope, divine exhortations (such as vs. 34) make sense: they are not conditions by which we are to win God’s approval, but they are appropriate ways of living in a world which God has promised to redeem. The focus is not on the apocalyptic signs but on the God who is at work.

The earlier portions of Luke 21 make this clear (cf. vs. 8). Thus, this is a time not for predicting, but for testimony (vss. 13-15). Such testimony will involve both words and faithful actions of people infected by hope: we will ourselves be signs, our hope will be contagious, and some around us may also be infected with what has been called “a resurrection hope in a crucifixion world.”⁴ “Raise your heads,” “be on guard,” “be alert”; these are not merely bits of moral advice from a great teacher. They are God’s word to all to whom the promises have been given, to encourage us to hope, prayer, endurance, testimony, and faithful obedience in the knowledge that our lives have a place in the cosmic purposes of God as those have been

decisively worked out in Jesus Christ. The birth of Christ in itself never saved anyone, but in the whole career of Jesus—his birth, teachings, deeds, crucifixion, and resurrection—the God of heaven and earth has drawn near to redeem us, and this work is being carried to completion even now.

Second Sunday in Advent: Luke 3:1-6

Chapter 3 of Luke is split somewhat artificially for the second and third Sundays of Advent. It is important to read the whole section (3:1-18) in order to understand Luke's treatment of John the Baptist. The synoptic parallels reveal the striking additions and changes made by Luke. Vss. 1-2 set John's role in preparing for Jesus' ministry in an historical, political, and religious context that makes it clear that the Christian movement was no secret or eccentric thing but a public reality. Missing from Luke is any description of John's appearance or of his baptizing anyone (not even Jesus, since in Luke John is imprisoned before Jesus is baptized). The focus is on John's words (Luke adds vss. 5-6 and several verses in 3:7-18 for Advent 3) as a means of clarifying what God is going to do in and through Jesus. A key phrase in Luke's account is "all flesh" (vs. 6). As a quotation from the Old Testament it can be understood in terms of carrying out Israel's mission to all nations; in the context of the early Christian mission, it reminds us of the inclusion of the Gentiles (which is the category that includes most of the readers of this journal!); and in terms of Luke's own theological presentation of Jesus, it may be seen to include various sorts of unlikely persons and groups, such as the wealthy, the religiously inferior, women, tax collectors, etc.

While the introductory section's importance may elude us at first, it should be noted that most of those mentioned in vss. 1-2 play a role later in the book. For the most part they were real people who had been overthrown by the time Luke wrote and whose power turned out not to be as secure as it had seemed when they had opposed John and Jesus. For Luke's readers, such persons had been important perhaps fifty years before (comparable to contemporary awareness about Pearl Harbor); this section would serve both to anchor the story in history and call to mind actual events and subsequent developments. Vs. 2 suggests that John

⁴See Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

received a prophetic call and thus speaks for God in what follows, not only in the literal sense of quoting from God's word, but in terms of his words in 3:7-18 as well.

What should be preached from this passage? Jesus is not mentioned in it, nor are faith, hope, or love. The seemingly significant statement that John preached "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" seems to be included as part of the tradition, but no stress is put on it in vss. 1-6 (however, see vss. 7-18 for Advent 3). There is no emphasis on John's own person or faith. Does this passage qualify in any way as the basis for a Christian sermon? If we look for the promises, they occur only in the passage quoted from Isaiah 40:4-5 (in vss. 4-6)—most of which Luke alone includes—culminating in the words, "all flesh shall see the salvation of God." What is unique to Luke's account, and significant for this Sunday of the church year, is the placement of John in the drama of world history and salvation-history and the declaration that, in John's prophetic words and deeds preparing the way for Jesus, *God* was at work putting everything together to bring salvation to all flesh.

Salvation open to all is the purpose of John's baptism of repentance, just as it was the purpose of the calling of the chosen people of Israel. All of this focuses on Jesus, as is clear from what precedes and follows 3:1-6; but for this Sunday the emphasis is on God's everlasting mercy and faithfulness, working in, with, under, and despite the political and religious communities to reach all people, to make all things new and right. "Repentance" in this context is not so much returning to God, still less feeling sorry for past offenses; rather, it is a turning back toward God's future as that was spelled out and inaugurated in Jesus. While it may often seem to us as if life just rolls along, with no plot or purpose or direction, this passage tells us that God is at work, that he entered into history in a decisive way in Jesus, and things will never be the same again. Faith means living from that center; it means that we always have our bearings at a particular spot, in an event that took place "in the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberias."

Yet history did not end there, for Jesus himself becomes part of the promise also, so that even as we live now in the "year of our Lord" we wait for the "day of the Lord." Christians live in this urgent and vital "time between," our faith in Christ anchoring us through love in the present and by hope in the future. (It is the future coming of Christ that we pray for in the Prayer of the Day, not his coming at Christmas!) The "salvation of our God," which all flesh shall see, includes, in Luke's exposition of it, all those activities in which Jesus engages, for he is the savior raised up by God (1:69; 2:11). This is what we shall hear about all during the year of Luke. On this Lord's day we are told of our location in the midst of this divine promise-keeping, in God's time, in the year of our Lord. As we hear Christ's word and receive his body and blood, we also become his word and body for others; that is, we become part of the divine providence, instruments (as John was) in God's mission that all flesh shall see salvation.

Third Sunday in Advent: Luke 3:7-18

The offense in John's preaching becomes clear immediately: he preaches to the crowd who had come to be baptized—denouncing them as offspring of serpents; sarcastically asking why they (of all people) are coming to be baptized; and demanding that, if they will be baptized, their lives demonstrate that they have

turned around (repented). From now on actions and not bloodlines will tell who are the true people of God. Luke alone has vss. 10-14, describing this new obedience in social and economic terms, previewing similar words and actions of Jesus. Commentators debate whether such teachings are calling for radical structural change or are aimed at instructing those who are well off on the appropriate use of wealth; in either case, John's words insist that the salvation that God is bringing in Christ is to lead to obedience in worldly affairs.

John's reference to the baptism that Jesus will bring contains both the addition of the Holy Spirit and the fire that will burn the chaff (that which is useless in the new activity that God is beginning). For this Sunday, this section (vss. 15-17) only picks up the urgency and radicality of John's call to repentance. But in Luke's own presentation, this leads directly to John's arrest and then to Jesus' own baptism, where Jesus is given the Holy Spirit and undergoes his trial by fire, beginning with his temptation in the wilderness and continuing through his crucifixion. Such matters are taken up on the First Sunday after the Epiphany (The Baptism of our Lord), when vss. 15-17 are repeated. For Advent 3 the conclusion is vs. 18, in which Luke alone says that John's

call to repentance and declarations of what God will do are “good news.” That may not be immediately apparent, as it was not to Herod, who imprisoned John, but it demands the attention of the preacher.

If all that precedes vs. 18 is good news, we cannot hear only accusation in that verse. We must also see God’s fulfilling of the divine promises concerning salvation. God will restore his people, and the one who comes after John (and the one to whom we have been joined by baptism) is the principal means for that restoration. In Luke, Jesus is both the one in whom God saves us and the model of the godly life for us; such salvation will thoroughly change us and it will be good for us and for others. Our lives are to be realigned toward God’s future salvation, right down to our daily work, our possessions, and our behavior. The Holy Spirit and the fire that come with Christ’s baptism are God’s way of changing us. If we hear this only in religious terms, we miss the biblical force of these words: “Spirit” is the same word as “wind,” and in this context perhaps it is more like God’s whirlwind, God’s tornado, which, along with the fire, turns everything upside down and gets rid of all the unessentials. The judgment must come; that is only good news in the sense that after the judgment comes the kingdom. After the threshing and burning of the chaff the wheat is gathered. After repentance comes forgiveness. After crucifixion comes resurrection. There is no other way, this passage is telling us, than God’s way. And this is good news, for it is into this way that we and all flesh are invited.

*Fourth Sunday in Advent: Luke 1:39-55*⁵

In the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth and in the Magnificat of Mary we have the use of pre-Lucan materials to make the point of what Jesus came to accomplish. God’s Spirit is again at work (vs. 41) revealing God’s will to save the people, now through the lives and words of these women. Using the whole passage (including the Magnificat) will make it clear that the focus is not on Mary but on God: as Luther said, the hiddenness of God in the lowliness of Mary. Mary glories in the

⁵On texts from Luke 1 and 2, in addition to the sources listed in note 2, see Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979).

divine regard (vs. 48); and the subject of all the verbs in vss. 49-55 is God. The emphasis is not primarily on Jesus’ birth but on the conflict and judgment that the Messiah brings and on the reversal of the old ways that results. This is good news for the hungry and those of low degree but bad news for the proud, the mighty, and the rich. Despite our possible sentimental familiarity with this passage, it raises the stakes of our thoughts about Jesus as we approach Christmas: are we hoping for such salvation in him or not? This is a crucial question since the Magnificat presents clearly God’s distinctive way of ruling. The Advent of God brings judgment, reversal, and challenge, and this is the way God shows mercy. The birth of Jesus in itself never saved anyone; don’t leave the cross out of Christmas!

While women are portrayed as the speakers of these two canticles, the focus is not on them. Scholars think that both canticles existed in the tradition, and it is not even clear that Mary (rather than Elizabeth) is the speaker of the Magnificat. Luke’s point in these passages is God’s fulfilling of the ancient promises, not the quality of the women’s faith nor their role as models for us. Hearing (or saying or singing) their words is part of our repentance and faith, directing us

toward the future of the promise-keeping God of Jesus Christ. Stressing overmuch their role as women or simply as human beings risks putting the emphasis on our response rather than on God's faithfulness and saving work. Here and always one preaches for faith not by exhorting people to believe but by presenting a God in whom one can believe.

Afterword: The Lucan Texts for the Christmas Seasons

The assigned texts for Christmas Day (Luke 2:1-20) and the First Sunday after Christmas (Luke 2:41-52) continue many of the same themes that have already been mentioned: the historical and religious specificity, the eternal purposes of God being focused in the person of Jesus, and the paradoxical use of "good news" to refer to something as lowly as a baby born in a barn. Familiarity with the birth story, especially, and its use in modern celebrations of Christmas (home for the holidays, chestnuts roasting, dreaming of a white Christmas, watching Sunday School programs) probably prevent most worshipers from hearing the high theological meanings connected with this blessed event. Yet this baby is the messianic savior, the Lord, the good news long promised, the one whom shepherds worship and angels praise. This may strike many as nostalgic or romantic in a post-Christian time and place, but in first-century Palestine, long occupied by foreign rulers, it was an astonishing claim, with political and social implications as well as religious significance.

The story of the child Jesus in the temple may seem simply irrelevant or archaic in our time, both because of its setting in ancient Jewish religious practice and because of its dubious historical foundation. Yet for the reader of Luke's narrative, it is significant that Jesus will not enter Jerusalem again until his royal entry and cleansing of the temple prior to being crucified. Here we are allowed to know from the beginning the identity and authority of this one who calls God "Father," who instructs the teachers of Israel, and who (above all) is part of the divine necessity (vs. 49) that is so much a part of Luke's thought.

Reinhold Niebuhr used to warn against preaching didactic sermons on holy days because they risked diverting worshipers from the sublime mystery of the

central symbols of Christian faith. On such occasions (but only then) the Reformed Niebuhr preferred a high liturgy instead. Perhaps the preacher at Christmas should point reverently toward the mystery of God in Christ, suggesting and implying and inviting rather than attempting full explanation or developing all implications. Yet preach we must if people are to believe, and when we preach, in this case on passages from Luke, we cannot preach only on the birth of Christ or his childhood in isolation from the larger purposes of God as these were worked out in the whole of his life, death, and resurrection. Some years ago, at McCosh's used book store near the University of Minnesota, the rather cynical proprietor put a sign in his store window in early December that said, "Put the X back in Xmas." Though he did not intend it, perhaps he put it correctly: put the X back in Christmas, i.e., put the cross back in Christmas. Tell the whole story. The birth of Jesus never saved anyone.