

*Once he came in blessing,  
All our ills redressing;  
came in likeness lowly,  
Son of God most holy;  
bore the cross to save us,  
hope and freedom gave us.  
Still he comes within us,  
still his voice would win us  
from the sins that hurt us;  
would to Truth convert us:  
not in torment hold us,  
but in love enfold us.*

*In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Last Sunday, I talked to you about the change in liturgical season to Advent, and I briefly alluded to the fact that the transition into Advent is the beginning of a new year, at least as far as the Church is concerned. Now don't worry you haven't missed anything as dramatic as a ball dropping from the baldacchino over the altar and all the fun that comes with the change of the calendar year is less than a month away. So, while the change from one Church year to the next comes with less drama (and noticeably fewer hangovers), there are some small changes for liturgy nerds from Church year to Church year. One of the most obvious comes in the lectionary, the cycle of Bible readings we use week to week. And just as we did 3 years ago, our Gospel lessons for much of the coming

year will be from St. Luke's account. Which is great for me, because I really admire Luke as an author, and I very much admire the texts he prepared

Today's brief lesson from Luke actually has a couple of examples of what I enjoy about his work, what makes his Gospel and its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles, among the more approachable texts of the New Testament. Notice that Luke has an elegant way of helping his readers to locate his account in a particular time in history. He has given us a pretty clear date for his reporting of Christ's ministry. Emperor Tiberius had been in office for 15 years, and the governors of the area around Jesus were Pontius Pilate (a Roman) and Herod (a Jewish ruler who was basically culturally Roman). We get a few more names of officials in power that readers tend to gloss over as they get into the chapter. Which is probably fine, but Luke wanted his readers to know those names because he knew his first audience would know exactly who those guys were. Just as many of us can name the president and state governor and then associate that with a particular era in history, Luke was counting on the same pattern for his earliest readers and certainly his readers in the centuries after. I love this detail because I love history, and this kind of detail helps me to appreciate the fact that Jesus and his ministry were things that actually happened, and Luke wanted his readers to be able to know *when* they happened by knowing who was calling the earthly shots.

Now, Luke was probably a Gentile convert to the faith. But his mastery of the Old Testament is clear even from the earliest chapters of his Gospel. By the start of the third chapter, he's already walked us readers through several important Biblical themes like the temple, the priesthood, angels, God's miraculous work among his people; even women who couldn't have babies. Luke has gently woven those themes into Jesus' origin story, connecting Jesus to the story of his ancestors in Israel, drawing a direct tether to Israel's hope in God and in the one that God would anoint: the Messiah, the Christ. In our lesson today, we find that he wanted his readers to be aware of who was taking care of the Temple in Jerusalem, and thus grounding Jesus' story once again in Israel's ancient and contemporary history. The same God worshiped by Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, and the Israelites even up to the time of Anna and Caiphas the high priests (not to mention the famous prophet John the Baptist), that same God was working some amazing things around Galilee as Jesus was about to begin his ministry.

Now, as I mentioned, Luke as an author tends to weave Old Testament themes into his work with an elegant subtlety. But in today's lesson, he made the connection between John the Baptist and the ancient story of the Bible explicit. Luke quoted Isaiah outright, perhaps so that there could be little mistaking John the Baptist's role in God's plan in salvation; especially for those acutely aware of the Messianic expectations roiling around Jesus and his friends at the time. Indeed, Luke wanted his

audience to know that John was fulfilling a role set forth many years before, in accordance with God's mysterious plan for redemption, beautifully rendered in the words of John's forebear in the prophetic role. Luke wants us to see that the people around John were preparing for the coming Messiah by their repentance. By their turning towards God as ritualized in John's baptism, this work by John and the people was the very way that the yawning chasm between God and His favorite creation, us would be closed. The winding path to God would be straightened out, the valley and mountain of our ascent to God would be flattened,

*and the crooked shall be made straight,*

*and the rough ways made smooth;*

...to put it the way Isaiah did. Luke wanted his readers, wanted us to know that the work begun in John the Baptist, and fulfilled in Jesus Christ would be nothing less than all flesh seeing God's salvation, that repentance would be on offer to all people, that everyone would soon be able to hear God's invitation to turn to Him through the life, work, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.

My friends, Luke's masterwork of a Gospel is chock full of amazing details that allow us to see how God was bringing his light, love, and rescue to fruition in Christ, and Luke sought for us to receive that as the culmination of the Biblical story. But his text is not just meant for liturgy or Bible nerds to uncover all the fun details. Luke, his other colleagues

the evangelists, the apostles, the saints throughout the ages, we all have an invitation to the same story that was unfolding in the fifteenth year of Tiberius' reign, unfolding in the families of Elizabeth and Mary, unfolding among the high priests, and unfolding even here, even now in the hearts of those who would follow after God's Anointed One, Jesus. This Advent season, I pray that among the busy-ness of preparing for the holidays, that we take a few minutes to read some of Luke's work again. We're going to hear from him quite a bit over the coming year, so why not get a leg up? I think you'll find that just as God was so marvelously present among Jesus' friends, family, and neighbors (especially in the early chapters), that God certainly seeks to be with us, to show forth His love to us, and to guide us into His abundant life for us. And today, I pray that we exalt our Savior Jesus, the...

*One who thus endureth  
bright reward secureth.  
Come then, O Lord Jesus,  
from our sins release us;  
let us here confess thee,  
till in heaven we bless thee.*

To Christ be all glory from age to age. Amen.