

ADVENT
for
EVERYONE

LUKE

A Daily Devotional

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WRIGHT

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INTRODUCTION



If people know anything about Advent, they know it's the time when we prepare for Christmas. And when they think of Christmas, they almost always think of Luke. It's Luke that tells us about the angel Gabriel visiting Mary to tell her of God's choice that she should be the mother of his son. It's Luke who has the angels singing to the shepherds in the fields near Bethlehem, and the shepherds then going to find Jesus in the most unlikely place – a manger! – proving that the angels' words had been true. So if Advent is getting ready for Christmas it's also getting ready for Luke.

But Luke can help us with the 'getting ready' as well. Partly this is because he gives us the 'backstory' about John the Baptist, explaining that his birth, too, had been a remarkable act of divine providence. But it's even more, because at various key points Luke explains that what happened to Jesus, and even more importantly what happened *through* Jesus, was the fulfilment of Israel's scriptures. The Bible of the day told a great, sprawling story – of God and the world, God and Israel, God and the hoped-for future. Luke explains that this story reached its appointed goal with Jesus himself. Luke insists that if we want to understand Jesus, and particularly in Advent if we want to understand him better, we have to go back

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to the Law, the Prophets and the Writings – to the whole ancient scripture of God’s people.

In particular, Israel’s scriptures were pointing to one great ‘arrival’. Many in Jesus’ day were expecting a ‘Messiah’ – a national leader, a warrior king perhaps. But behind and underneath this hope there was a deeper hope again. Prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel, and in the more recent period prophets like Zechariah and Malachi, had insisted that one day *God himself would come back, to ‘visit and redeem his people’*. Luke insists that when we read the story of Jesus this is indeed what we are witnessing, even though the story of Jesus he tells isn’t the kind of thing that people had imagined when they thought of the glorious return of Israel’s God. Somehow, he is telling us, when Israel’s God finally comes back to rescue his people, he comes in the form of this deeply, fully, gloriously human being Jesus of Nazareth. Luke’s portrait of Jesus, perhaps more than any of the other gospels, brings out his character as loving, caring, helping, healing – as well as challenging those who dig their toes in and refuse to come onside with God’s rescuing project. And Luke insists that *this is what it looks like when God comes back to reign*. This is what Israel had been waiting for. This is what – if it had known its business – the whole world should have been waiting for.

And that brings us to the other side of Advent: because this season isn’t just about getting ready for Jesus to be born. It’s about getting ready for Jesus to come back. Luke offers a full sweep of global history, from the creation right through to the new creation; and Jesus is the middle of it all. From the moment when Jesus announced in Nazareth that this was the time for God to become

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king, right through to his resurrection and commissioning of his followers to take his message to the ends of the earth – Luke’s story is moving towards the ultimate moment when, as the angel says in Acts chapter 1, Jesus will return at last, to reign over the rescued and renewed creation. This ‘second advent’ is often not well understood. Different ideas and theories abound. Luke helps us work our way into this set of questions by placing his emphasis on the powerful compassion with which Jesus came alongside and rescued the weak, the helpless, the sick and the hopeless. It is Luke who gives us Jesus’ parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. It is Luke who has Jesus meeting a grieving widow and restoring her dead son to life. It is Luke who describes Jesus praying, while being crucified, that God would forgive the men who were torturing him to death.

So Luke is an ideal guide to Advent. The readings for the present book have been chosen to give you a focus for prayer and meditation as you share this journey with other Jesus-followers around the world. With Luke, we find ourselves back in the first century, walking with Jesus along the dusty roads of his homeland, watching with horror as he goes to his death, and then celebrating with astonished joy as he rises to launch God’s new world. And with that, Luke will help us return to our own day, to ask humbly and seriously what it will mean for us to walk with Jesus in our own world. My hope and prayer is that this book will help churches, groups and individuals to be ‘Advent people’, celebrating the coming of God’s light into the world that often still seems very dark.

WEEK 1: A TIME FOR ENCOURAGEMENT

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Watching for the Son of Man: Luke 21.25–36

²⁵‘There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars. On earth the nations will be in distress and confusion because of the roaring and swelling of the sea and its waves. ²⁶People will faint from fear, and from imagining all that’s going to happen to the world. The powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷Then they will see “the son of man coming on a cloud” with power and great majesty. ²⁸When all these things start to happen, stand up and lift up your heads, because the time has come for you to be redeemed.’

²⁹He told them this parable. ‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees. ³⁰When they are well into leaf, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is upon you. ³¹In the same way, when you see all these things happening, you will know that God’s kingdom is upon you. ³²I’m telling you the truth; this generation won’t be gone before all of this happens. ³³Heaven and earth may disappear, but these words of mine won’t disappear.’

³⁴‘So watch out for yourselves,’ said Jesus, ‘that your hearts may not grow heavy with dissipation and drunkenness and the cares of this life, so that that day comes upon you suddenly, like a trap. ³⁵It will come, you see, on everyone who lives on the face of the earth. ³⁶Keep awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that will happen, and to stand before the son of man.’

Travel with me, back in time, to Jerusalem. The year is AD 58, nearly 30 years after Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. Many people in the holy city came to believe in

Jesus in the heady days nearly a generation ago, and many of them are still here, older and more puzzled perhaps, but still waiting and hoping and praying.

Things have been difficult, on and off. Once Pontius Pilate stopped being governor people hoped life might improve, but there was then a huge crisis over the emperor's plan to place a vast statue of himself in the Temple. The threat, fortunately, was seen off; Gaius, the emperor in question, had died soon after; and when one of Herod's grandsons, Agrippa, was made king of the Jews in AD 41, everyone in Jerusalem stood up and cheered. To be ruled by one of your own might be better than having governors from far away who didn't understand local customs. That didn't last, though. He too had died, struck down (said some) by God for blasphemously claiming the sort of divine honours that his pagan masters had given themselves. Now there had been a string of new Roman governors, each one (it seemed) worse than the last. But in 54, when Nero became emperor, many people hoped again that peace and justice would triumph.

All along, though, people in Jerusalem were aware of the political tensions building up. Revolutionary movements arose, had their moment of glory, and were brutally crushed. Some said the priests were secretly involved. Some said it was all the wicked brigands, refusing to let ordinary people go about their business in peace. Some wanted an easy-going peace with Rome, others were all for driving hard bargains, others again wished the Messiah would come. Daily life went on: buying and selling, growing crops, tending herds, woodwork, leatherwork, moneychanging, pottery, with the daily round of Temple sacrifices, music, celebrations and the seasonal feasts as

the constant backdrop. The Temple itself was almost complete: the programme of rebuilding begun by Herod the Great 70 years earlier was finally drawing to a close.

And in the middle of all this, those who named the name of Jesus, who still met to break bread and worship in his name, and to teach one another the stories of what he'd done and said, were pulled and pushed this way and that. Some of them were friends of the ex-Pharisee Saul of Tarsus, now known as Paul. He had been here not long ago, and had caused a riot (his friends said his opponents had caused it, but the word on the street was that riots tended to happen wherever Paul went). Now he'd gone, sent to Rome for trial, and he wouldn't be back. Peter, too, had gone on his travels and hadn't been seen for years. Others were sceptical of Paul; he had compromised God's law, they said, allowing Gentiles to worship God through Jesus without demanding circumcision. The leader of the Jerusalem Christians, the wise and devout James, the brother of Jesus himself, was getting older, and his prayers for the redemption of his people didn't seem to be answered.

How easy it was for Jerusalem Christians to become weary! If the gospel was producing exciting results, it was doing so across the sea, and they only heard about it every once in a while, and didn't always like what they heard (Gentiles claiming to worship Jesus but not keeping the law of Moses – that sort of thing). Their lives dragged on day by day. Friends asked them, sometimes unkindly, when this Messiah of theirs was going to reappear, and could he please hurry up because much more of these Romans banging around would bring on a world war, and anyway look what's happened to the price of bread, and if

Jesus had really been the Messiah, why has nothing much happened since? Not much use to say that when you met for worship the sense of Jesus' presence and love was so real you could almost reach out and touch him. Not much of an answer to say that you had been told to be patient. Thirty years is a long time. All you could do would be to retell the stories, including the sayings of Jesus such as you find in this passage. Hang on. Be alert. Prop your eyes open – physically, perhaps, spiritually for sure. Pray for strength to meet whatever comes. The son of man will be vindicated, and when he is you want to be on your feet.

Now travel with me to San Francisco, or Sydney, or Bujumbura, or San Salvador, in the twenty-first century. You emerge from the church on Sunday morning – the Pentecostal celebration, the Anglican Matins, the Spanish Mass – and there is the world going about its business, or as it may be its pleasure. Your friends think you're odd still going to church. Everybody knows Christianity is outdated, disproved, boring and irrelevant. What you need is more sex; more parties; more money-making; more revolution. Anyway, hasn't the church done some pretty bad things in its time? What about the Inquisition? (They always say that.) What about the Crusades? Who needs Christianity now that we have computers and space travel? (They said it before about electricity and modern medicine.)

And anyway, they say, if your Jesus is so special, why is the world still in such a mess? They don't want to know about the freeing of the slaves, the rise of education and the building of hospitals; they certainly don't want to know about the lives that are changed every day by the gospel. They want to load you with the cares of this life;

DON'T GIVE UP! (2.41–52)

and, as Jesus warned, with dissipation and drunkenness, literal and metaphorical. They want to wear you down, to make you think you're odd and stupid. Why study an old book, they say, that's never done anyone any good?

The answer is the same for us as it was for the Jerusalem Christians nearly a generation after Jesus. Keep alert. This is what you were told to expect. Patience is the key. Pray for strength to keep on your feet. There are times when your eyes will be shutting with tiredness, spiritual, mental, emotional and physical, and when you will have to prop them open. This is what it's about: not an exciting battle, with adrenalin flowing and banners flying, but the steady tread, of prayer and hope and scripture and sacrament and witness, day by day and week by week. This is what counts; this is why patience is a fruit of the spirit. Read the story again. Remind one another of what Jesus said. Encourage one another. And keep awake.

For Reflection or Discussion

Do you ever find yourself growing weary in your journey of faith? What encourages you to keep going?

WEEK 1: MONDAY

Don't Give Up! Luke 2.41–52

⁴¹Jesus' parents used to go to Jerusalem every year for the Passover festival. ⁴²When he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. ⁴³When the feast days were over, they began the journey back, but the boy Jesus remained in Jerusalem. His parents didn't know; ⁴⁴they thought he was in the travelling party, and went a day's journey before looking for him among their relatives and friends.

⁴⁵When they didn't find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. ⁴⁶And so it happened that after three days they found him in the Temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷Everyone who heard him was astonished at his understanding and his answers.

⁴⁸When they saw him they were quite overwhelmed.

'Child,' said his mother, 'why did you do this to us? Look – your father and I have been in a terrible state looking for you!'

⁴⁹'Why were you looking for me?' he replied. 'Didn't you know that I would have to be getting involved with my father's work?'

⁵⁰They didn't understand what he had said to them. ⁵¹He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and lived in obedience to them. And his mother kept all these things in her heart.

⁵²So Jesus became wiser and taller, and gained favour both with God and with the people.

When I was a child, I walked a mile to the bus stop every morning, by myself or with my sister. At the other end of the trip, I walked by myself to school. In the evening, I came back the same way. I never felt unsafe, even in the dark winter days. Now, in many places, children are often taken to school by car. Parents are worried about all kinds of dangers that might be waiting for them.

Perhaps the first remarkable thing about this story is that Mary and Joseph were happy to set off with their large group from Galilee without checking that Jesus was with them. That tells us a lot about the kind of world they lived in, where extended families of kinsfolk and friends lived together in close-knit mutual trust. But, by the same token, once they had left Jerusalem,

and when they returned to it by themselves, without the rest of the party, the city was a large and potentially dangerous place, full of dark alleys and strange people, soldiers and traders, not a place where one would be happy to leave one's son for a few days.

The agony of Mary and Joseph, searching for three days, contrasts sharply with the calm response of Jesus when they found him. Mary blurts out an accusation, perhaps tinged with that mixture of guilt and relief that most parents will recognize. Instead of saying, as she might have, 'How could *I* have done this to *you*, leaving you behind like that?', she says, 'How could *you* do this to *us*?' Jesus accepts no blame, and indeed issues a gentle rebuke that speaks volumes, in Luke's portrait, for his own developing self-awareness. 'Your father and I,' says Mary, 'have been looking for you.' 'No,' replies Jesus, 'I have been busying myself in my father's work.' Some families today keep notebooks of the striking things their children come out with. Mary kept her notebook in her heart, and this remark in particular will have gone straight there with a stab.

The way Luke has told the story may strike a careful reader of his gospel as part of a large-scale framework around the main story, which is just about to begin. One of the best loved moments in his gospel is the story of the road to Emmaus (24.13–35), in which two disciples are sharing their anguish over the three days that have elapsed since Jesus' death. Jesus meets them, and explains how 'it was necessary that these things had to happen'. Here is another couple, coming back to Jerusalem, finding after three days the Jesus they thought they had lost, and having him explain that 'it was necessary' (the word is the same in Greek) 'that I had to be busy at my father's work'.

You might call the pair of stories something like, ‘On Finding the Jesus You Thought You’d Lost’. And if that is the message of these two passages, maybe Luke is wanting to tell us something about his gospel as a whole: maybe he is writing, at one level at least, for people who may have some idea of Jesus but find he is more elusive than they had imagined.

Finding him, of course, will normally involve a surprise. Jesus doesn’t do or say what Mary and Joseph, or the two on the road, were expecting. It will be like that with us, too. Every time we relax and think we’ve really understood him, he will be up ahead, or perhaps staying behind while we go on without thinking. Discipleship always involves the unexpected.

At the heart of the picture, though, is Jesus in the Temple – a theme full of meaning for Luke. The gospel will end with the disciples in the Temple praising God. But, in between this beginning and this end, the Temple, and the holy city which surrounds it, are the subject of some of Jesus’ sternest warnings. From now on Jesus will be challenging his contemporaries to make real the promises that go with the Temple. If they don’t, the Temple itself will be destroyed.

As we read this story prayerfully, then, we can probably identify quite easily with Mary and Joseph – and perhaps with Jesus, too, quietly asserting an independence of mind and vocation, while still returning home and living in obedience to Mary and Joseph. We may want to remember times when we thought we’d lost someone or something very precious. We may want to reflect on whether we have taken Jesus himself for granted; if Mary and Joseph could do it, there is every reason to suppose that we can too.

We mustn't assume he is accompanying us as we go off on our own business. But if and when we sense the lack of his presence, we must be prepared to hunt for him, to search for him in prayer, in the scriptures, in the sacraments, and not to give up until we find him again.

We must expect, too, that when we do meet him again he will not say or do what we expect. He must be busy with his father's work. So must we.

For Reflection or Discussion

Do you ever feel that you've lost touch with Jesus? If so, what might help you regain and retain a sense of his guiding presence?

WEEK 1: TUESDAY

Jesus' Baptism and Genealogy: Luke 3.21–38

²¹So it happened that, as all the people were being baptized, Jesus too was baptized, and was praying. The heaven was opened, ²²and the holy spirit descended in a bodily form, like a dove, upon him. There came a voice from heaven: 'You are my son, my dear son! I'm delighted with you.'

²³Jesus was about thirty years old at the start of his work. He was, as people thought, the son of Joseph, from whom his ancestry proceeds back in the following line: Heli, ²⁴Matthat, Levi, Melchi, Jannai, Joseph, ²⁵Mattathias, Amos, Nahum, Esli, Naggai, ²⁶Maath, Mattathias, Semein, Josech, Joda, ²⁷Johanán, Rhesa, Zerubbabel, Shealtiel, Neri, ²⁸Melchi, Addi, Kosam, Elmadam, Er, ²⁹Joshua, Eliezer, Jorim, Matthat, Levi, ³⁰Simeon, Judah, Joseph, Jonam, Eliakim, ³¹Melea, Menna, Mattatha, Nathan, David, ³²Jesse, Obed, Boaz, Sala, Nahshon, ³³Amminadab, Admin, Arni, Hezron, Perez, Judah, ³⁴Jacob,

Isaac, Abraham, Terah, Nahor, ³⁵Serug, Reu, Peleg, Eber, Shela, ³⁶Kainan, Arphachsad, Shem, Noah, Lamech, ³⁷Methuselah, Enoch, Jared, Mahalaleel, Kainan, ³⁸Enosh, Seth, Adam, and God.

When I visited New Zealand some years ago, I was taught how to greet an audience in the traditional Maori fashion. I much enjoyed and appreciated the welcome I was given by this ancient people, many of whom are now devout Christians, and the chance to learn something of their history and culture.

Many of the Maori people in New Zealand can tell you which of the original eight long canoes their ancestors arrived in when they first arrived in the country between 800 and 1,000 years ago. There is every reason to suppose that this memory of family trees and origins is reasonably accurate. Many peoples in today's world, and perhaps still more in the ancient world, regularly told and still tell stories of family history, and though these may be embellished from time to time, they are often to be seen as trustworthy. Only in the modern Western world, or where there have been huge social disruptions from war and migration, have people lost touch with ancestry beyond a generation or two.

The Jews were particularly conscious of ancestry, with good reason. God had made promises to Abraham and his family for ever, and through wars, enforced exile, and attempted genocide, they clung (as they still do) to their memories and stories of ancestry as to a lifeline. The books of Chronicles in the Old Testament begin with several chapters of names, which seem very tedious to a modern reader, but were vital for people at the time. They needed

to know who they were, which meant knowing which part of the people of Israel they belonged to.

So to begin with it seems surprising that we have not one but two quite different family trees for Jesus. Matthew begins his book with a list of names from Abraham to Jesus; Luke includes a list of names working back from Jesus, through Abraham, to Adam and thence to God himself. And the odd thing is that the lists don't match. Luke has considerably more generations between Abraham and Jesus; and, though some of the stages are the same, the lists part company altogether between David (around 1000 BC) and Salathiel and his son Zerubbabel (after the exile), and then again between Zerubbabel and Joseph. Even the name of Joseph's father is different. In any case, what is the point of a genealogy of *Joseph*, when both Luke and Matthew insist that he was not in fact Jesus' physical father?

Ever since the early days of the church, learned scholars have struggled to give good answers to these questions, and most have admitted defeat. Obviously, in a small and close-knit community, there is every probability that someone could trace their descent from the same source by two or more different routes. The Maori can give several different genealogies for themselves, depending on which ancestor they want to highlight and how much intermarrying has taken place. Different tribal sub-units can trace their descent in different ways for different purposes, resulting in criss-crossing links of all sorts.

This is so even in modern Western society. After my own parents married, they discovered that they were distant cousins, with one remove of generation. Think of the

little country of Israel in the period between David and Jesus; similar things could easily have happened. Many could have traced their descent to the same ancestors by at least two routes.

Luke, it seems, has come upon a family tree which he presents without comment, simply to declare that Jesus was indeed not only a true Jew but a descendant of David and Zerubbabel – part of the genuinely royal family. He was counted as Joseph’s adopted son, which served, it seems, for this purpose (we are never told whether Mary was of royal descent; since she was a cousin of Elisabeth it may be that she was from a priestly family). If there were other motives in the arrangement of names as they came to Luke (some have suggested that the 77 names should be seen as 11 groups of 7), he doesn’t draw our attention to them.

The one link between the family tree and what goes before and comes after is the final phrase: Jesus is the son of God. Of course, by that reckoning so is everyone else in the list, from Joseph right back to Adam. Luke certainly means more than this when he uses the phrase ‘son of God’ as a title for Jesus (1.35; 3.22; 4.3, 9). Perhaps it is best to see the family tree, stretching back to the creation of the world, as a way of saying that, though Jesus is indeed the Messiah of Israel (another meaning of ‘son of God’), he is so precisely for the whole world. All creation, the whole human race, will benefit from what he has come to do.

This global scope to God’s purposes is in the background as Jesus comes to the Jordan to be baptized by John. Luke adds here, as in one or two other key points, the fact that Jesus was praying when the crucial revelation

occurred. Part of his constant picture of Jesus is that he was a man of prayer. It's often suggested that the baptism was the moment when Jesus received his first inkling of a messianic calling, but this can hardly be correct; the voice from heaven comes to confirm and give direction to something that has been true all along, as Luke has already told us (2.49). The spirit and the word together give Jesus the encouragement and strength he needs to begin his short public career.

They also give an indication of where that career will take him. The heavenly voice echoes words of Isaiah the prophet (42.1), commissioning the Messiah as the Servant, the one who will suffer and die for the people and the world. Behind that again are echoes of Genesis 22.2, when Abraham was commanded to kill his beloved only son, Isaac. The voice is at the same time a wonderful affirmation of Jesus' vocation and a clear reminder of where it is to lead.

Together the baptism story and the family tree tell us where Jesus has come from, who he is, and where he is going. As we make his story our own in our own prayers, and indeed in our own baptism, we too should expect both the fresh energy of the spirit and the quiet voice which reminds us of God's amazing, encouraging love and of the path of vocation which lies ahead.

For Reflection or Discussion

How clear is your vision of the spiritual path ahead of you? How might reflecting on the experience of Jesus help you to see it more clearly?