

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 1ST IS A VERY BIG DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH; CHRIST CHURCH AND BEYOND

On Sunday, December 1st, three very important events begin. We enter Year C in our Sunday readings, we begin a year of working our way through St Luke's gospel and the new church year begins with the season of Advent.

Year C

December 1st we start Revised Common Lectionary Year C. A lectionary is an ordered system of readings of The Bible for Eucharist and the Daily Office. Year C takes us on a journey through the gospel of Luke with a brief pause for a few readings from John and Matthew. In order to fit with the liturgical seasons, the readings from Luke are not always sequential. Perhaps most notable is that much of the 1st chapter describing the arrival of John the Baptizer is absent. Despite the omissions and sometimes meandering route through Luke, Year C provides exposure to the vast majority of the gospel.

The Gospel of Luke

Since this year we will be going through Luke, I'd like to give you a brief introduction to the gospel. Traditionally, the gospel is attributed to a man named Luke, who early New Testament scholars believed to be a physician. More contemporary scholars now question his status as a physician and most conclude that his occupation was simply unknown. Likewise, the Gospel of Luke is addressed to an unknown person named Theophilus. Because the literal translation for the name Theophilus means: "friend of God," one could argue that the book of Luke is dedicated to anyone who is a "friend of God."

Luke's gospel is the longest of the four gospels and thus includes several points of information and parables that are unique. Luke is the only gospel author who writes a detailed birth narrative for Jesus and includes mention of the shepherds watching their flocks by night. The stories of the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, and the Persistent Widow, are all included in Lectionary Year C and also unique to Luke's gospel.

A major theme in the book is Jesus' radical welcome of everyone—especially those people who were often looked upon as outcasts. In some Episcopal churches, the invitation to communion is preceded with these words, "Whoever you are and wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome." The gospel readings for the year reinforce such messages of welcome by describing the wide variety of people who become companions of Jesus. They are tax collectors, fishermen, women and children, people who are poor, sick, or even demon possessed. In Luke, Jesus meets people wherever they are on life's journey and invites them to follow him.

The stories and parables within Luke also lend themselves well to regular preaching and teaching series about love, freedom, and justice. Beginning in the Advent season with John's prophesy of a restructured equitable world order; to the Christmas story of an unmarried woman being chosen to give birth to our Lord; to the season of Epiphany in which Jesus makes it clear that his mission is to "let the oppressed go free;" to a passion narrative that includes the redemption of a dying criminal; Luke's gospel offers multiple opportunities for reflection on Womanist and Liberation theologies.

It's important to notice that the setting for the book is during a time when Jewish people are living under Roman occupation. This context is important to note as we consider the subversive and dangerous nature of Jesus' parables and actions.

The Advent Season

When planning worship, we must keep in mind the different seasons of the church year and how they relate to each other. This is true not only for the whole year but also with respect to two smaller cycles within the year; the incarnational cycle (Advent, Christmas and Epiphany); and the Paschal cycle (Lent, Holy Week, Easter, through to Pentecost).

Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, while foreshadowing the death of Jesus, all play on the larger theme of the Incarnation *as such* and its significance for the redemption of the world, both now and at the end of time. It is common to think of these three seasons as moving along a narrative, and they surely do, since Year C's gospel of Luke (with some John and Matthew interspersed from Christmas through Epiphany) foregrounds both Jesus' life and ministry and our own discipleship as a journey along the Way. But one might also think of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany along the lines of a three-movement symphony where primary motifs appear and reappear, in relation to the Incarnation, in various forms through the three seasons.

Advent's theme is, consistent with its historical genesis as a penitential observance, focused on God's call as redeemer and judge of all time. Advent sets our celebration of the Incarnation into this framework of anticipation of this redemption and gracious judgment.

The tone of this penitence, slightly different than the readings in the Lenten season, are filtered through confidence and eagerness that God is coming, and the call to make ready as a course of joy. Themes could focus on repentance and making ready; anticipation of a great gift; longing for the reign of God; the deepening of our sensitivities to what is broken to a world that needs God's coming; and the realization that our expectation that God's promise will be fulfilled, as the readings shift toward the approach of the Feast of Christmas.