



guide to prayer and study | week of September 19, 2021

Gospel of Luke with daily reflections from N. T. Wright

MONDAY 09.29.2021

Read: Luke 1:1-56

Reflect: Think of the last time you badly wanted something to happen and had to be patient. Remember what it felt like, day after day, to feel your patience getting stretched thin. Sometimes, perhaps, hope seemed to run out altogether. Then, one day it happened – or at least, the first tell-tale signs arrived. What did you most feel then? Relief? Excitement? Joy? The sense that everything was going to be all right now?

Now imagine that waiting going on for hundreds of years, through the memory and imagination of a small, embattled nation. Things had gone from bad to worse, with the sense that the world had turned upside down. The rich and the arrogant, the selfish and the cheaters seemed to always come out on top. But there was a promise that one day a new world would be born in which everything would finally be turned the right way up and everyone would be rescued. Then one day it happens. Or at least the first tell-tale signs arrive.

The whole of Luke's gospel is about the way in which the living God has planted – in Jesus – the seed of that long-awaited hope in the world. It begins with that tiny life in Mary's womb. It continues with Jesus as a young adult planting seeds of hope around Galilee and Jerusalem. It climaxes with Jesus himself being placed in the dark tomb and rising again to launch God's worldwide project of putting the world the right way up. That's the story of Love we are now invited to live inside and make our own.

Pray: As you read Luke with others in our congregation this Fall, come with your hopes and longings, your awareness of the ways in which the world is still out of tune. You might begin, today, by thinking about some situations, whether in your own life or far away, where the world is not yet right. Hold them before God in prayer and patience. And then look for the signs of hope around you, the first stirrings of God's new life. And give thanks to God for the way in which God is at work in the world today. There's a long way to go. But the journey begins here.

TUESDAY 9.21.2021

Read: Luke 1:57-80

Reflect: Imagine being in Elisabeth's shoes. You are the childless woman in the village. Everyone thought you were too old to have children. You have often felt that people were always talking about you behind your back, pointing you out to others. You felt the weight of other people's sadness or shame for you. Sometimes you even imagined them saying that God had cursed you... Who are the people in your circle who may feel this way about some part of themselves or some situation in their life?

Now imagine Zechariah. Ever since the news that a baby is on the way, he has been struck dumb – unable to talk. No one really understands what’s going on with him, but it adds to the excitement as the community waits for this unexpected birth. And then the moment arrives. Everyone looks to the father for a reaction, for a name! Still unable to speak, he writes it down. ‘His name is John.’ And in that moment, like champagne bubbling out of a bottle, he erupts in a string of spoken praise! All the old promises have come true. This little baby is going to tell people to get ready! God’s promise to rescue his people and the whole world is happening at last!

As you sit with this reading today, can you sense something happening in yourself? Can you hear a voice saying to you, ‘Yes, it’s true; I am doing a new thing – and you have a part in it!’

Pray: Sit there for a while, watching and listening. Join in the great stream of praise, but turn it into a prayer as well.

Lord, where do I fit into this new picture? What task have you prepared for me? Where can I bring hope to the fearful, and daylight into the darkness of this world?

WEDNESDAY 9.22.2021

Read: Luke 2:1-21

Reflect: Imagine if you were one of those shepherds out on the hills near Bethlehem, suddenly finding that instead of leading your sheep to where they can get food, someone else is telling *you* to go and find something – *someone* – who’s lying in a feeding-trough! How absurd does that sound? You and your companions are being asked to become the sheep!

The reality is that the great Shepherd himself has been born! The King is here, and you are his sheep, his people. And you are being asked to come and find him.

Pray: Pause and think prayerfully about what sort of decision it takes to do what the angels were insisting. It sounds crazy. It could be dangerous. But it could also be the moment towards which your whole life had been leading. Think about the quiet messages you get from time to time; perhaps not from angels singing but from a soft whisper that tells you to go somewhere unexpected, to do something you hadn’t planned, to visit someone you weren’t previously thinking about. What message are you hearing today?

Lord, let me be ready to hear your voice. And let me be eager to obey, to come and worship.

THURSDAY 9.23.2021

Read: Luke 2:22-52

Reflect: Come to the Temple on that spring afternoon. The Temple building itself stands in a much larger open area, itself the size of a small town, with plenty of room for people to come and go, to walk about and meet one another. There are crowds milling about as usual, rich people strolling by with

friends and hangers-on, soldiers from the occupying forces looking down from their watchtower, animals and birds being bought and sold in the markets by the gate. There are plenty of beggars about, hoping to cash in on the pilgrims' sense of God's mercy and the obligation to be generous in turn. And there are old people, as always, sitting in the shade, under a tree here and in a doorway there.

Most people don't notice the young couple coming in with their baby. But an old man does. He moves to the couple and takes the baby in an embrace as gentle and firm as the love of God. He has seen something nobody else has. He has been praying and waiting for this moment all his life and now it has come. This is the Messiah! He has seen him with his own eyes! Now he can die in peace.

How do you feel as you hear him say that? What does it make you want to do, or to pray?

Pray: Today, pray for the Holy Spirit to give you wisdom and inspiration to know what to pray for, and how to recognize God's moment when it comes.

Gracious Lord, give me your Spirit, that I may seek your will and recognize it when it comes.

FRIDAY 9.24.2021

Read: Luke 3

Reflect: Come down to the lowest point on the face of the earth. When you drive from Jerusalem into the Jordan valley, roughly halfway down the road you pass a sign saying 'Sea Level.' If you'd been going in the other direction you would now be standing by the Mediterranean Sea. Instead, you've still got a long way to go, down into the valley that ends with the Dead Sea.

John the Baptist knew he had a job to do, and we as spectators gather round, listening to his stirring talk and seeing how people react. He had come to the lowest point on earth because that was where God had met with his people before when they were on the verge of crossing over into the promised land. John believes that God's people are now on the verge of something new, something even bigger.

As we listen to his stirring words, we think to ourselves, 'Yes! There's so much in the world that needs straightening out!' There's terrorism, famine, war and all kinds of bitterness and divisions. Even around where I live, people are unhappy or unemployed or unloved. Or all three. We want God to come back and sort it all out. And we start to pray that it may be so indeed.

As we read on we discover that Jesus will be the way God is coming back. People start to ask, 'What should we do?' The answer is, 'Straighten your lives out in the simplest, most direct way.'

Pray: Ask God to help you see the places in your own life where mountains need to be flattened and valleys need to be filled in to make room for God to come in and take up residence.

Lord, show me how my life can be straightened out, so that your healing, restoring power may flow through me to the world around.

SATURDAY 9.25.2021**Read: Luke 4**

Reflect: After Jesus began his work of launching God's kingdom elsewhere, he came back to his home town. Not only did everybody know him and his family (always a tricky situation), they knew what, if he *really was* bringing God's kingdom, he ought to be doing.

Imagine yourself that sabbath morning, standing at the back of the synagogue with this young man, apparently some king of a prophet, sitting down in the teacher's chair. The main thing you know is that you and your people are in a big mess, and it's time that God stepped in and sorted it all out! Anyone claiming to be a prophet – let alone quoting the scriptures and saying they're all coming true – ought to be telling us how God will rescue his own poor people, sort out the bad characters, and smash the heathen invaders to smithereens. That is how it's supposed to work, right? Isn't that what God is supposed to be doing?

But look at what happens next. This young would-be prophet is talking about *grace*! About 'the year of God's favor.' Well, that's fine, we all know about the Jubilee, the time when everyone is to be released from all their debts. Maybe it's time we did it once and for all, and more thoroughly. But... he's talking about God doing that for everybody! The wicked and the pagans are going to be freed as well! We can't have that! Who does he think he is?

Unfortunately for us, God tends to stand all of our good, sound advice on its head. God is turning the whole world upside down. Which means God is turning *our* whole world upside down as well.

Pray: As we allow a scene like this to wash over us, we will sometimes hear a disturbing question: when we know, only too clearly, what we think God ought to be doing, are we prepared to take a second opinion? God's opinion?

Sovereign Lord, teach me to listen to you even when you're saying things I badly don't want to hear.