

2018

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Recommended Citation

Skinner, Matthew L., "Looking High and Low for Salvation in Luke" (2018). *Faculty Publications*. 306.

https://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/306

Published Citation

Skinner, Matthew L. "Looking High and Low for Salvation in Luke." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 45, no. 4 (September 17, 2018).

<http://currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/article/view/147>.

Looking High and Low for Salvation in Luke

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Luke's Gospel, more than any other Gospel, politicizes the salvation God accomplishes through Jesus Christ.

In other words, Luke calls attention to certain political aspects of the “good news” that angels, prophets, John, Jesus, and his followers announce and enact. The deeds Jesus performs, the declarations he makes, and even the sheer reality of who he is—these things have social, interpersonal consequences that affect the mores and assumptions that undergird people's interactions and identities. When Jesus teaches and acts, he confronts and transforms the configurations of power and powerlessness that inform a collective sense of value and human dignity. To call some dimensions of the Gospel according to Luke “political,” therefore, is not to imply that Luke is concerned about issues such as an individual's relationship to a governing body or one's legal status within a geopolitical entity. Luke does not offer explicit reflection on what modern people refer to as “the state,” policy, or citizenship. Luke, however, delights in good news that has public, regenerative ramifications for life lived in relationship with other people.

The Third Gospel, especially when it speaks about God's ability to reorder people's social standing and honor, informs social constructs about belonging. Salvation in Luke involves changed loyalties. It promises transformed identities. It rewires the social circuitry and individuals' grasp of their and their neighbors' place within it. Those are the kinds of “political” consequences that manifest themselves when God, to borrow a pair of Lukan images, calls people to “move up” and occupy seats of greater honor and security (14:7–11) and pronounces someone like a mercy-seeking tax collector more righteous than a Pharisee (18:9–14). Jesus makes it obvious that, with him, the old ways of navigating the sociopolitical landscape no longer apply.

The magnitude of Luke's promises about sociopolitical change has made the book a vital source for liberative theologies—for good reason and with life-giving effects. This Gospel, especially in its early chapters, sets high expectations. In several passages Lukan characters perceive far-reaching and systemic changes, depicting an alternate society in which justice and restoration come to full bloom. To people like Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon (Luke 1–2)—as well as Jesus' witnesses in Acts—the coming of

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the Messiah means everything is changing; after the resurrection, nothing seems impossible. When Jesus describes his own ministry (Luke 4), he speaks of liberation from all kinds of oppressions. But those who preach and teach from Luke sometimes struggle to reconcile the Gospel's most lofty assertions with the rest of the narrative, which has much less to say about such *widespread* social change. Luke poses challenges for many interpreters who are eager to understand how Luke's vision comes to fruition. The grand upheavals promised in some texts are difficult to detect in other passages.

This article explores a handful of prominent texts that are unique to Luke and that paint the Third Gospel's notion of salvation in revolutionary hues: Mary's and Zechariah's prophecies (Luke 1:46–55, 67–79), an angel's announcement of Jesus' birth (Luke 2:8–14), and Jesus' brief sermon in Nazareth (Luke 4:14–21). With these passages Luke leads its audience to expect big things, but then the rest of the narrative can lead one to wonder whether that initial rhetoric was exaggerated. The whole of Luke nevertheless still sees big, revolutionary change coming to pass through Jesus Christ. The task, especially for preachers and teachers who lead others through the Gospel bit by bit, is to let the whole narrative indicate where to look for that change occurring. This article, through an overview of texts and concluding reflections on working with Luke in the current sociopolitical climate, aims to help preachers and teachers appreciate ways in which the early chapters of Luke can shine a light on the Gospel as a whole.

Visionaries in the infancy narratives (Luke 1–2)

Mary

The first characters who appear on Luke's narrative stage are prophets; they interpret God and God's activity with images of disordering and reordering. When Gabriel, Elizabeth, and especially Mary and Zechariah speak, they anticipate widespread, lasting, social change. A new order has arrived, or is certain to arrive. Mary's statements (1:46–55), in which she weaves her experience as an unlikely chosen one together with Israel's memories and hopes, tell of a God who brings about upheaval. Just as God's favor turns her slave-like "lowliness" into acclaimed blessedness because of her role in bringing about God's new future, so also God dismisses sovereigns from their seats of authority and elevates the powerless.¹ When God acts, the stage is large. God causes the hungry to receive food. Mary may not dwell on what cruelties caused their hunger in the first place, for her greater point is that God will be their sustainer. God reorders the categories and corrects the injustices.

Commentators often refer to Mary's praise (the Magnificat) as a declaration that "a great reversal" is at hand.² God's promises to Israel will come to fruition when the Davidic king in Mary's womb (1:32–33) comes into his reign, and those promises will utterly alter the sociopolitical terrain. Mary is not inciting revolution through human effort but extoling a God whose past accomplishments and on-the-record scriptural statements have endorsed and pledged justice—specifically a justice that refuses to allow one class of people be victimized by another. By describing God in terms of God's professed commitments and God's power, echoing values and phrases already voiced in scriptural texts, her words call on God to act on God's own deep dissatisfaction with the way things are. Her pregnancy and Gabriel's revelations do not lead her to dream of an abstract hope but convince her that the arrival of the Messiah simply cannot leave the current state of affairs as it is, where the powerful hold sway and the vulnerable are considered of no account.

But are the political energy and passion of the Magnificat's vision sustained? Upon reaching the end of Luke, and again the end of Acts, readers may ask what the Magnificat was all about. It can be read as hyperbole, spiritual metaphor, error, or the overture

1. Mary refers to herself as a slave (*doulē*) in 1:48 as well as in 1:38. Published translations that insist on using "servant" in these verses blunt the dramatic status change that Mary declares to be God's own doing. Any deity who blesses slaves, literal and otherwise, and lifts up other lowly members of imperial society is potentially disrupting the political status quo.

2. See, e.g., Justo L. González, *Luke* (Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 22. References to a "reversal" taking place in Luke can become guilty of oversimplifying the dynamics in this Gospel. John T. Carroll's discussion about different kinds of "status transpositions" is more helpful (*Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016], 160–167). As I note below, the rest of Luke-Acts hardly imagines a zero-sum game in which a one-dimensional status continuum simply inverts itself when Jesus acts. Luke depicts something more complicated than winners and losers merely trading places.

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of a slowly developing eschatological symphony. None of those answers is exactly correct, yet the original question about the Magnificat's function is reasonable. After all, when the Gospel's narrative concludes, the powerful remain on their thrones and the rich still enjoy full stomachs. Easter's victory does not exactly mirror other revolutionary events from scripture such as the Exodus. In fact, Mary's song would seem more appropriate to Miriam's context on the bank of the Red Sea (Exod 15:20–21). Moreover, along the way in Luke some powerful and wealthy characters emerge as virtuous, perhaps even as a consequence of the power and privileges they possess, such as a centurion with exceptional faith (7:1–10) and a wealthy tax collector who can show great generosity (19:1–10).³ Not everyone in Luke falls into a neat category of either "the powerful" or "the lowly." Not all of those presumably on top are thrown to the bottom.

Read in light of the overall narrative, the function of the Magnificat cannot be said to reduce the people on the losing sides of Mary's prophecy—the proud, the powerful, and the rich—to flat stereotypes. This is not to suggest that the Magnificat's exuberance should not be trusted. Rather, it is to note that Mary's declaration extols God as the one who will identify and expose the proud, powerful, and rich wherever they reside. And they may show up in surprising places.

Interpreters limit the Magnificat if they take it to apply only or primarily to national rulers or others with significant power over or within a population. For Luke, the arena of human injustice (and justice) is not just about where sinister elites dwell in an overarching imperial system. When Jesus gets down to business, the Gospel's outlook tends to focus instead on contexts like households, neighborhoods, and kinship groups. What unites

3. The question of whether Zacchaeus changes his behavior or finally sees his generous practices publicly acknowledged in 19:8–9 makes for lively exegetical debate. For an overview of the issue, see Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 666–673. No matter why or when Zacchaeus gives away so much money, it is nevertheless reasonable to assume that at the end of the day the chief tax collector remains wealthier than the majority of Jericho's residents (see also 3:12–13).

blameworthy characters in Luke, such as Pilate, Simon the Pharisee (7:36–50), Herod Antipas, a rich ruler (18:18–30), or a synagogue official who expresses indignation over a healing performed on the sabbath (13:10–17), is not their offices but their misplaced assumptions about social standing and their desire to preserve dominant, controlling ideologies.⁴ Mary’s prophecy knows that strong boundaries between insiders and outsiders safeguard the prerogatives of those who maintain the boundaries. The assumptions, ideologies, and boundaries—in other words, the tools of dominance—are Jesus’ practical focus in the episodes of his public ministry. For Mary’s part, she confidently asserts that the ethos of dominance and its dehumanizing effects will be obliterated now that the Messiah is at hand. The Caesar will not be chased out of Rome, but the foundational social conventions that ensure his supremacy have lost their moorings. Once that happens, change can occur anywhere.

Zechariah

When Zechariah offers his prophecy after John’s birth (1:67–79), like Mary he has salvation on his mind (1:47, 69, 71). By referring to the redemption of God’s people, preservation from enemies, and God’s covenantal faithfulness to the nation, he uses scriptural imagery about conflict and restoration to build his description. In the second half of his prophecy (the Benedictus), when he turns to speak of divine knowledge, forgiveness, and guidance, he claims that the developments to come will be manifestations of God’s mercy. Joel B. Green raises the question whether Zechariah’s claims offer two conflicting views of salvation—one focused on Israel’s hopes and security and the other focused on forgiven sins and communal wholeness. In other words, do Zechariah’s various claims clash with each other, or are they mutually interpreting? Green answers his question by insisting that any disjunction one might see in Zechariah’s words likely owes itself to modern tendencies to view political deliverance primarily in terms of occupying militaries and imperial macroeconomies. Luke operates instead from a perspective that sees Christ’s new era as involving social, religious, and political change all at once.⁵ The *primary* problem that Zechariah sees God addressing through Christ, therefore, is not a specific imperial apparatus that suppresses Israel’s hopes, nor is it hopelessness born from bad choices. Rather, Zechariah speaks about the downfall of an oppression and a powerlessness that is woven into the ethos that fills all corners of life.⁶ The dominance that God is halting resides in public squares, marketplaces, and homes. Interpreters risk missing the picture if they construe Zechariah’s words as a promise of just one kind of regime change.

Mary, Zechariah, and the author of Luke—these people re-

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sided in a world that believed history was guided by suprahuman beings or other invisible forces. What their visions of salvation tell the Gospel’s ancient readers is that only God can direct the course of history and bring freedom and belonging to situations of oppression and alienation. Their statements are less about the condemnation or overthrow of a specific political system or a specific empire and more about a claim that God has not abandoned them or their world to more of the same. If the Messiah is indeed here, things will change.

An Angel

The three canticles of Luke 1–2 have much to say about the character and scope of the Gospel’s soteriology.⁷ Other parts of Luke’s infancy narratives have more to say about christology—what it is about this newborn figure from the house of David that produces such a salvation. One such example centers on an unnamed angel of the Lord who announces Jesus’ birth in 2:8–14 and in the process makes a bold statement about the authority that makes God’s salvation a reality.

The angel’s declaration of “good news” about a “savior” who is “the Christ, the Lord” probably sounded familiar to many ancient readers and auditors. Those terms all have roots in Jewish writings, which contributes to Luke’s efforts to portray the coming of John and Jesus as a fulfillment of longstanding promises and expectations. Several of the terms also had potential to resonate with the rhetoric of Roman propaganda in Luke’s ancient setting. A gospel (*euangelion*) was a report of a military victory or a beneficial deed performed by a generous emperor.⁸ A gospel promised good things

4. See Halvor Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom: Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke’s Gospel* (OBT 23; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 75–108.

5. *Luke*, 114–115.

6. It exceeds the scope of this article to discuss the satanic power that Luke identifies in those oppressive dynamics. Note, e.g., 4:13; 22:3, 31; Acts 10:38.

7. Simeon is responsible for the crucial declaration (2:29–32) about the *extent* of God’s salvation through Jesus Christ: it will benefit “all peoples” for it promises to affect gentiles and Jews. Note, too, that only in Luke does John assert that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (3:6). The scope is wide indeed.

8. For the book of Isaiah’s use of this term in the Serptuagint (the LXX), see Isa 40:9; 52:7; 60:6; 61:1.

to come, such as prosperity or security. As for “savior” (*sōtēr*) and “lord” (*kurios*), those words were appropriate titles for Roman emperors, local rulers, and other cultural elites. By referring to Jesus as “the Lord,” as well as a “Savior” who signals the advent of “peace,” the angel implies that God is doing more than dispensing spiritual blessings at the first Christmas. The coming of the Messiah reaffirms a distinctive identity for God’s people: they will manifest loyalty to a different ruler—not to Augustus, Quirinius, or anyone else (2:1–2), but to Christ the Lord.

Again, in the case of the angel’s announcement, a foundational piece of the Lukan narrative makes claims about Jesus as a threat to the status quo and its constellations of power. Yet the rest of Luke-Acts seems to steer interpreters away from making too much of these terms, as if speaking of Jesus as “Savior” and “Lord” must somehow set forth Jesus as a clear opponent of the empire and the men who run it. As the narrative proceeds, few characters in Luke-Acts take offense at those titles as evidence of explicit disloyalty to Rome. Pilate shows interest when the priestly aristocracy glosses the title *Messiah* as “a king” (23:2–3, 36–38), and a group of antagonists in Thessalonica stir up a crowd by claiming Paul and Silas are promoting “another king” in opposition to the Caesar (Acts 17:7). But beyond those passages, the issue receives little attention. Indeed, confusion over the claims of messianic authority is as common as offense, such as when Festus concludes that the disturbances surrounding Paul are mostly an obscure intra-Jewish dispute (Acts 25:18–19).

The titles appear to possess at least the potential to impart a more revolutionary flavor to Luke. Certainly, they do so in an ironic way, such as when Jesus suffers humiliation and death as an ineffective savior and as an outcast branded “the King of the Jews” (Luke 23:35–38). But over the course of the whole story the titles function mostly as insider knowledge. They do not stir up much else, from the narrative’s point of view, at least not on their own. If Jesus and his message are indeed going to be guilty of “stir[ring] up the people” (23:5) and “turning the world upside down” (Acts 17:6), it is not because Jesus’ titles alone are responsible for bringing the political implications of the gospel into view. His salvation will show itself in its results.

A synagogue sermon in Nazareth (Luke 4:14–21)

The story of Jesus’ sermon in his hometown synagogue adds depth to several Lukan christological motifs, including the role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus’ ministry, Jesus’ identity as a rejected prophet, and the extension of divine mercy to presumed outsiders. It also prompts readers to conceive of Jesus’ accomplishments as wide-ranging deliverance. Luke will not cooperate with interpreters who want to limit the notion of salvation to forgiveness, for salvation is a more expansive phenomenon in this Gospel. When Jesus proclaims in the synagogue that he fulfills Third Isaiah’s vision, he characterizes salvation with images of freedom, restoration, and empowerment. The Holy Spirit has not compelled Jesus to declare a pardon, to perform a transaction that settles a debt, or to avert divine wrath. Jesus has come to deliver—to set people free *from*

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In 4:18–19 Jesus does not read a single passage but a combination of Isa 61:1–2a and a phrase from Isa 58:6. By weaving these two texts from the Septuagint together, Luke emphasizes a word that appears in both, “release” (*aphesis*): the Spirit sent Jesus “to proclaim release (*aphesis*) to the captives” and to “bring about release (*aphesis*) for the oppressed” (my translation). Because Luke makes this scene the first extensive event of Jesus’ post-wilderness ministry, the scriptural mash-up has a programmatic effect for the whole Lukan narrative. Jesus has come to effect release.

The rest of the scripture reading illustrates what this release looks like: the poor receive news that will benefit them, captives go free, blindness gives way to vision, oppression ceases, and a new era of divine “welcome” dawns.⁹ That was Third Isaiah’s vision of the restoration that would come after exile—a renewed existence that God bestows on those who were at risk of losing it all in Babylon. Yet the Isaianic notion of “release” did not arise out of nothing. It, too, had roots in other hopes and theological convictions. Laws about the year of Jubilee (literally, a year of release [*aphesis*] in Lev 25:10, LXX) inform the words from Third Isaiah.¹⁰ According to Lev 25:8–55 (LXX), a passage that employs *aphesis* repeatedly, all of the “release” accomplished during a Jubilee year promotes justice and balance throughout Israelite society. In Jubilee years, families who had to sell land during the previous fifty years could repurchase it at a fair price. Indentured servants would receive their freedom.

By the time Jesus gets to the cross in Luke, he will have preached good news to the poor and powerless, restored sight to some who suffered from blindness, and broken the chains of some oppressions. But he does not grant other freedoms or restore land. In other words, he does not follow up on the claims of the Naza-

9. On the translation “the year of the Lord’s *welcome*” in 4:19 as opposed to “favor” in the NRSV, see Joshua W. Jipp, *Saved by Faith and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 21.

10. Sharon H. Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee: Images for Ethics and Christology* (OBT 19; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 25–32.

reth sermon in a literal, comprehensive way. Luke does however continue to speak of *aphesis*. In a few key places, the expression *aphesis* “of sins” appears (1:77; 3:3; 24:47; see also the verb *aphiēmi* in 5:20–24; 7:47–49; 12:10). In those instances, most English translations render *aphesis* as “forgiveness.” The Isaiah reading in Luke 4:18–19 and the Jubilee imagination that nourishes the Isaianic assumptions about God indicate that Luke regards *aphesis* as more than blanket absolution granted by a patient Deity. *Aphesis* from sins is a form of release. Those who have been “forgiven” have moved from oppression into a new, liberated existence.

The value of spending time with Jesus’ rhetoric in Luke 4 is that doing so reiterates that Luke regards sins (the problem) and salvation (the solution) as part of a largescale drama with far-reaching consequences. As Patrick D. Miller observes, the Isaiah passages and their wider contexts lead interpreters to “understand that which God began in Jesus not simply as release from sin but as all those concrete kinds of physical, social, and economic liberation of which the Old Testament speaks.”¹¹ According to Jesus’ sermon in Nazareth, forgiveness of sins expresses God’s overarching intention “to break whatever yokes bind persons, to provide release from those aspects of human existence in which people find themselves oppressively bound and captive.”¹² Given that Jesus makes this claim in the power of the Holy Spirit (4:14, 18) and will later pour out the same Holy Spirit on his people in Acts 2, the gift of the Spirit further characterizes God’s salvation as liberation.

Reflections

This brief exploration of Lukan texts has emphasized that they imagine the institution of a new society—one in which social norms are reconfigured, loyalties are redirected, and salvation has a wholistic scope. These texts do not support a concept of individual salvation in which God only cleanses hearts or zeroes a balance and then sends people back to play the same game on the same social playing field. Instead, God sends Jesus Christ to deal with oppression in all its forms. At the same time, Luke does not include much to suggest that the Gospel imagines a new kind of governmental arrangement or a cessation of systematic injustice breaking in anytime soon. (Even some characters in the narrative seem disappointed that this has not yet occurred, such as in Luke 24:21 and Acts 1:6.) Luke, it appears, devotes more energy toward directing attention to places where a new political ethos manifests itself, even if the effects of the new ethos may not yet extend very far. These places are not where visible militaries fight or where human elites hoard the spoils of their privilege. Instead, Jesus conducts a mobile ministry and situates himself in villages—places mostly local but nevertheless influential in their own right.

I conclude with reflections on how and why those who preach and teach Luke’s Gospel should keep their eyes trained to see salvation bursting forth in those kinds of places.

The meals underscore the communal nature of Jesus’ salvation. They are often controversial moments, showing Jesus giving and receiving hospitality alongside apparently unworthy people.

Meals and parables

Meal scenes and parables offer useful examples of places to look in Luke. These passages are of course prominent pieces of Luke’s depiction of Jesus’ public ministry. It is vital to see these scenes, not simply as pedagogical venues or rhetorical flourishes for Jesus’ ministry, but as expressions of the political transformations that the early parts of Luke promise Jesus has come to provide.

The meals underscore the communal nature of Jesus’ salvation.¹³ They are often controversial moments, showing Jesus giving and receiving hospitality alongside apparently unworthy people (5:30; 7:39; 15:2; 19:7). Ancient audiences would recognize that extending and receiving welcome around tables creates and reaffirms strong ties and obligations among Jesus, his hosts, and his guests. When Jesus dines with people who, according to some social calculus, do not belong with him, the meal becomes a declaration of solidarity. The meals indicate the creation of a new family, a new community, a new society. Salvation in Luke involves belonging, and one’s new identity becomes confirmed by hospitality. Accordingly, Jesus compares the reign of God to a banquet (Luke 13:29; 14:15–24), since all the participants in that new world order share space around a single table, no matter what their qualifications might have been according to the old way of construing value and dignity.

The parables that are unique to Luke include a variety of themes, but in general they too are a way of proclaiming the emergence of new political realities. When a Samaritan puts himself at risk to care for an injured Judean, and when a shepherd leaves ninety-nine sheep at risk to seek out a lost one, Jesus compares conventional assumptions about value and propriety to the new ethos of the reign of God. His parables characterize a new kind of life and social vision. These are not stories about power-hungry kings who get their comeuppance (although 19:11–27 may describe a notable exception); they tend to declare the alien—almost absurd—character of a salvation that exposes and condemns the folly of individuals who hoard their wealth or prerogatives at the expense of others.

On the whole, the new values, the new belonging, and the new freedom that Luke promises with the stirring words of chapters

11. Patrick D. Miller, “Luke 4:16–21,” *Interpretation* 29 (1975): 420.

12. *Ibid.*, 421.

13. Robert J. Karris, *Eating Your Way through Luke’s Gospel* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2006).

1–2 and 4 come to expression in passages such as the meal scenes and parables. Luke’s narrative mostly avoids veering into the landscapes where emperors, generals, governors, and the priestly aristocracy roam.¹⁴ Instead it enters the smaller but just as politically corruptible and redeemable settings where everyday people circulate. In those places, communities of believers welcome one another, worship together, and live into the newness of the reign of God. In the meals and parables, Luke’s audiences see what it looks like when the reign of God begins to disrupt norms and promote the dignity of those who have been denied it.

Preaching and longing for justice

Some preachers shy away from Luke’s most grandiose soteriological rhetoric because they fear it will be heard as an empty promise in a world perpetually tormented by injustices and massive discrepancies in wealth and power. The grandiosity of some of Luke’s claims makes those passages downright discouraging in some congregational contexts. In other settings, preachers may be guilty of relying on Luke’s boldest promises to instill a false sense of comfort or even to lower expectations about Luke’s revolutionary edge, making those preachers liable to the kind of judgment God expressed through Jeremiah:

They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace (Jer 6:14).

But if Luke’s extravagant claims prepare us to read other parts of the Gospel with clearer vision, to see the magnitude of what God accomplishes in those places, then the texts from Luke 1–2 and Luke 4 examined above are as crucial now for shaping preaching and teaching about Luke’s liberative impulses as they ever have been. They help us see dominance being overturned in places where we might have overlooked it before. Sometimes those places are closer to home than we care to recognize.

For many people I know who provide leadership to congregations and their neighbors, the last two years have been exhausting and traumatic. It is easy for preachers and other spiritual leaders to suffer discouragement when the metrics for measuring change and our outlook for detecting the appearances of God’s reign are confined to the things that make the news and dominate social media, such as federal policies, Supreme Court decisions, and national trends. When refugees are given no opportunity to make a case for asylum in a safer country, when basic civil rights and the dignity they ensure are under assault, when health care becomes viewed as a privilege for the wealthy, when homelessness statistics are trending upward nationwide, when racial animus is still being used as a political rallying cry—these and other aspects of American life

14. At the same time, Luke-Acts is distinctive within the New Testament because of *how many* verses describe the gospel’s emissaries encountering powerful representatives of the Roman sociopolitical system. Those elite characters occasionally find themselves confronted by the realities of the reign of God. Some of them, in developments that might have delighted Mary, even find themselves included (e.g., Luke 7:9; Acts 6:7; 13:12; 17:34).

Preachers and teachers do well, therefore, to follow Luke’s lead and to see themselves as leaders trying to help others navigate a persistently unjust system. They should expect big things. But they should do so fully aware that Luke shows interest in shining a light on God’s salvation spilling into settings that are at the edges of the arena.

cannot be the church’s *sole* barometers for determining whether indeed God is still committed to lifting up the lowly (1:52) and letting the oppressed go free (4:18). Any Christian leader who attempts to measure the arrival of the reign of God using the daily news or governmental forecasts is guaranteed to be disappointed and left apologizing for their theology.

Almost certainly Luke was not written to tell ancient audiences that Rome was soon on its way out or that the structural lynchpins of imperial control and social prerogatives were targeted for immediate destruction. Luke equipped believers with the vision, convictions, and tools they needed to navigate their lives in an imperial system—a system that would not go away on its own. It was an imperial system that would not recognize the values and the political convictions that the good news of Jesus Christ promotes.

Preachers and teachers do well, therefore, to follow Luke’s lead and to see themselves as leaders trying to help others navigate a persistently unjust system. They should expect big things. But they should do so fully aware that Luke shows interest in shining a light on God’s salvation spilling into settings that are at the edges of the arena. Those are the settings where Jesus devotes most of his attention and where he calls his followers to take up the same work. Instead of looking *solely* at the level of nations, lawmakers, and militaries, preachers and teachers should look locally. Look at the kind of people and activities that animate Jesus’ parables. Look for them in your settings. Look at dinner tables and conference tables and see who might be invited and empowered there. Look into families, businesses, neighborhoods, community groups, clubs, and villages. Of course, there is no guarantee that the new realities Luke celebrates will be manifesting themselves in those less visible contexts. Those could be places of political despair, alienation, indignation, and utter fatigue in the face of stubborn injustice. But perhaps that is why you have been called to minister there.