

PERSONAL AND POLITICAL

Insights and conversation starters
from the Gospel according to St. Luke
in twenty-five sessions.

A resource for the *Book of Faith* initiative
within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.



book of faith

Open Scripture. Join the Conversation.



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LUKE'S GOSPEL: PERSONAL AND POLITICAL

The third gospel in the New Testament bears the name of a traveling companion of St. Paul who is mentioned three times in the letters attributed to the apostle (see Philemon v. 24, Colossians 4:14 and 2 Timothy 4:11) but not in its companion volume, the Acts of the Apostles.

However, Luke and Acts, are anonymous, and no one knows for certain the name of their actual author. He may well have had access to a collection of Paul's epistles and to the writings of Josephus. They were likely written around 110-115 CE, perhaps in Rome or some other urban center in the Roman Empire such as Philippi.

Luke's version of the story of Jesus is based on at least two other documents. One is the gospel of Mark, which most scholars think was written around 70 CE, when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem. Luke follows Mark's outline in most respects. Often Luke modifies Mark's anecdotes and frequently improves Mark's grammar.

The other source—commonly referred to as “Q”—is a reconstructed collection of Jesus' sayings based on teachings which appear in Matthew and Luke, but not in Mark.

The two-volume Lukan narrative is in well-written Greek and shares some of the qualities of ancient histories and biographies. In some places it reads like a novella; it preserves the significant events in the life of Jesus and the early Christian community in an edifying and entertaining way.

Also, from an evangelistic or apologetic perspective, **Luke-Acts shows that Christianity is compatible with the best of the Roman world.** Citizens may embrace this religion, Christians may participate in the social structures of the Empire, and both church and society will be better off.

More than the other gospels, **Luke identifies Jesus as “Lord,” or “Kyrios”** in Greek. In the Greek translation of the Jewish scriptures known as the Septuagint (abbreviated LXX), *Kyrios* is the title regularly substituted for the divine name “Yahweh,” a practice continued in most English versions today.

In the Hellenistic world, *Kyrios* was a title for the emperor himself, for some of the Greco-Roman deities, as well as for the head of the household.

The idea behind the title *Kyrios* was not so much that of a master who ruled things, as much as that of a benefactor, one whose purpose was to secure the welfare of all the citizens or of all the members of the family.

Thus **Luke pictures Jesus as the Great Benefactor** who is God's agent for bringing wholeness and salvation into the world. The benefactions he gave while on earth are to be seen as the culmination of the ancient hopes of the people of Israel and are subsequently continued by the Holy Spirit working in the life of the church.

Like many other heroic martyrs who deserve praise for their selfless service for others but who were rejected, **Jesus was not appreciated by many of his fellow citizens,** especially their leaders. Thus Luke shows an interest in the tragic aspects of Jesus' passion, when he died as an innocent martyr.

However, according to Luke's gospel, **Jesus was well received by many of the marginal members of his society,** including outcasts, poor people, sinners, Samaritans, women and Gentiles. Thus, according to the book of Acts, the church's expanding mission and its inclusive fellowship resonate well with our concerns for justice.

In spite of opposition and persecution, **undercurrents of joy and prayer run throughout Luke-Acts.** These are the correct responses which we today make as faith-filled people who enjoy God's benefactions and share them with others.

When we read this story today, **we naturally try to apply Luke's message to our own lives** as 21st century people who live in a progressive, prosperous, industrialized, democratic society.

We value such virtues as freedom, education, privacy, honesty, self-sufficiency, charity, independence, mobility, success, wealth, and the like.

Over twenty centuries ago, however, the situation was different. **The majority of Luke’s original audiences were auditors**, that is, they heard the narrative read aloud to them. Literacy was a privilege of the wealthier elite classes.

As much as fifty percent of the residents of the Roman world were slaves. The government, of course, was an imperial dictatorship, secured through military conquest and supported through a rigorous taxation system.

The official system of values included such virtues as personal honor, public benevolence, obedience to the authorities, self-aggrandizement, military prowess, disdain for the lower classes, loyalty to the Greco-Roman deities, familial integrity, and the like.

In a society in which “Caesar is lord,” those who claimed that “Jesus is lord” were taking a significant risk, both personal and political. For **many of the virtues espoused by the Christian movement**—such as love for one’s neighbor, respect for outsiders and lower-class people, forgiveness, the value of women and children, and charity—**ran counter to the values of the larger society** in which they lived.

In order to help us appreciate the attitudes of people in the Greco-Roman world, each of the following discussions includes a reading from a secular, non-biblical source which would have been familiar to many of Luke’s auditors.

Some are from philosophical writings which define accepted mores, some are inscriptions chiseled in stone for the general public, some are stories and legends of popular heroes or divinities and some are scraps of everyday correspondence preserved in papyrus letters.

When we read Luke’s gospel against the background of these Greco-Roman sources, we can better judge the accuracy and relevance of our own interpretations and applications. And then we may conclude that the gospel is relevant not just for our personal and family lives as church people, but it also speaks with authority to our social and political lives as citizens of the most powerful nation in the world today.

In other words, **the gospel according to St. Luke is both personal and political** in its claims for all Christian men and women who still dare to affirm that Jesus is Lord.



This series of exercises in reading Luke’s gospel has been prepared in conjunction with the *BOOK OF FAITH INITIATIVE*, a movement within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Its goal is to enable our people to become “more fluent in the first language of our faith, the language of Scripture.” It is a practical way for us to start living out our calling as disciples of Christ Jesus.

It assumes that we value the Scriptures as the “written Word of God,” because they are the basis for our “proclaimed Word of God,” which bears witness to the “incarnate Word of God,” who is Jesus Christ himself.

The *BOOK OF FAITH INITIATIVE* is based on the idea that we can read the biblical documents from four perspectives: “literary,” “historical,” theological,” and “devotional.” Attention to these will keep us from thinking of the Bible as an “answer book” for our questions. Instead, reading the Scriptures will become the means by which we are drawn into a relationship with the living God.

Literary analysis of narrative materials focuses on the characters, plot and setting of any story. Ask: Who are the main characters, and with which ones would you identify? What is the plot of the story, and how does its setting affect its emotional tone?

Historical analysis focuses on the context in which the narrative originated. Ask: Who wrote this? When? Where? Why? To whom? Did the author use other sources? Does it agree with, or contradict, other writings? How would it have been understood and used by its original readers?

Theological analysis explores the ongoing message or teaching of the text. Do we hear a text as Law, or as Gospel? Is it a word of command and condemnation, or promise and hope? How does it apply to our personal, family and church lives? How does it apply to our community, social and political lives?

Devotional analysis connects our Bible study with our prayer life. Does a passage call us to repentance? Or to action on behalf of our neighbor? Does it help us feel closer to God? Does it lift our spirits, and offer comfort or encouragement?

The **twenty-five discussion starters** which follow are not actually a running commentary on Luke; rather they are a series of insights into the text coupled with questions which are meant to provoke reflection and conversation. Do not feel obligated to respond to all of them. Some you may want to skip. Some may ignite extended discussion.

NEW BEGINNINGS

The twenty-five sessions in this study of Luke will not cover the entire gospel. Rather, we will engage key passages from each of its four main sections.

- *Jesus' place in history (1:1-4:13)*
- *Jesus' ministry in Galilee (4:14-9:50)*
- *Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (9:51-18:30)*
- *Jesus' final days (18:31-24:53)*

In this section we will focus on some of the key texts which relate the beginnings of Jesus' ministry. Some, like the so-called Christmas Gospel, are familiar to all. Others, like his very first sermon at Nazareth, may not be as well known.

As always, we will want to ask how these texts can apply to our lives as individuals and as families. But we will also want to stretch our horizons and ask how they can impact our larger cultural and social lives.

In a time when political issues confront us on the national and local scenes, we may be surprised to learn that the stories told about Jesus have some strong political overtones, especially in the context of the Roman Empire in which both he and the author of Luke lived.

Although we are selecting just a handful of items from the opening chapters of this gospel, it would be helpful to read all of Luke 1:1-6:49 to gain a sense of how the entire narrative begins.

The childhood stories in Luke 1:1-4:13 in particular are placed symmetrically in an especially pleasing and artistic alignment.

After a brief prologue (A; 1:1-4), an angelic announcement to Zechariah of the birth of his son John to his wife Elizabeth (B; 1:5-25) is paired with an angel's announcement to Mary herself of the birth of her son Jesus (C; 1:26-38). This is followed by a meeting of the two expectant mothers (D; 1:39-56).

Then come the stories of the births of the two boys: first, John (E; 1:57-80); then, Jesus (F; 2:1-21). These are followed by a pair of stories which take place in the temple at Jerusalem. First, the baby Jesus is presented to Simeon and Anna (G; 2:22-40); then the 12-year-old Jesus meets with scholars (H; 2:41-52).

A – Preface	
B – Announcement of John's birth	C – Announcement of Jesus' birth
D – Meeting of mothers *	
E – Birth of John *	F – Birth of Jesus *
G – Presentation * to Simeon & Anna	H – Conversation with scholars

Four of these sections (*) include poetic psalm-like canticles:

- Mary's praise, the *Magnificat* (1:46-55),
- Zechariah's prophecy, the *Benedictus* (1:68-79),
- the angels' praise, the *Gloria in Excelsis* (2:14), and
- Simeon's prophecy, the *Nunc Dimittis* (2:29-32).

As we explore these texts together during our journey of faith, we pray that God's Spirit will inspire our study and encourage our life together as neighbors in our community.

A POEM ANTICIPATING THE DAWN OF A NEW AGE

Around 40 BCE the Roman historian and poet Publius Virgilius Maro (70-19 BCE), or Virgil for short, wrote a poem, his *Fourth Eclogue*, celebrating the marriage of Mark Antony and Cleopatra. He anticipated that with the birth of a son their dynasty would inaugurate a new era of peace and prosperity. He was proven wrong, of course. Their child was a daughter, and they both died in 30 BCE after their forces were defeated by Octavian, who later became the first Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus.

[lines 1-4] *Sicilian Muses, let us sing a somewhat loftier strain. Not everyone do orchards and the lowly tamarisks delight. If your song is of the woodland, let the woods be worthy of a consul.*

[5-10] *Now is come the last age of Cumaean song; the great line of the centuries begins anew. Now the Virgin returns, the reign of Saturn returns; now a new generation descends from heaven on high. Only do you, pure Lucina, smile on the birth of the child, under whom the iron brood shall at last cease and a golden race spring up throughout the world! Your own Apollo now is king!*

[11-17] *And in your consulship, Pollio, yes, yours, shall this glorious age begin, and the mighty months commence their march; under your sway any lingering traces of our guilt shall become void and release the earth from its continual dread. He shall have the gift of divine life, shall see heroes mingled with gods, and shall himself be seen by them, and shall rule the world to which his father's prowess brought peace.*

[18-25] *But for you, child, the earth untilled will pour forth its first pretty gifts, gadding ivy with fox-glove everywhere, and the Egyptian bean blended with the laughing briar; unbidden it will pour forth for you a cradle of smiling flowers. Unbidden, the goats will bring home their udders swollen with milk, and the cattle will not fear huge lions. The serpent, too, will perish, and perish will the plant that hides its poison; Assyrian spice will spring up on every soil.*

[26-30] *But as soon as you can read of the glories of heroes and your father's deeds, and can know what valor is, slowly will the plains yellow with the waving corn, on wild brambles the purple grape will hang, and the stubborn oak distil dewy honey.*

[37-45] *Next, when now the strength of years has made you a man, even the trader will quit the sea, nor will the ship of pine exchange wares; every land will bear all fruits. Earth will not suffer the harrow, nor the vine the pruning hook; the sturdy ploughman, too, will now loose his oxen from the yoke. No more will wool be taught to put on varied hues, but of himself the ram in the meadows will change his fleece, now to sweetly blushing purple, now to a saffron yellow; and scarlet shall clothe the grazing lambs at will.*

[46-47] *"Ages so blessed, glide on!" cried the Fates to their spindles, voicing in unison the fixed will of Destiny.*

[48-52] *O enter upon your high honors – the hour will soon be here – dear offspring of the gods, mighty seed of a Jupiter to be! See how the world bows with its massive dome – earth and expanse of sea and heaven's depth! See how all things rejoice in the age that is at hand!*

[53-54] *I pray that the twilight of a long life may then be vouchsafed me, and inspiration enough to hymn your deeds!*

[60-64] *Begin, baby boy, to recognize your mother with a smile: ten months have brought your mother long travail. Begin, baby boy! The child who has not won a smile from his parents, no god ever honored with his table, no goddess with her bed!*

[Loeb Classical Library, vol. 63]

- How might Greco-Roman readers of Luke's narrative have expected the evangelist to introduce the story of Jesus' arrival on the world scene?
- Can you see why some later Christian authors referred to this poem as Virgil's "Messianic Eclogue"?
- Is this a common human longing? That a new leader or ruler or president will usher in a new age of peace and prosperity?

FIRST SESSION — LUKE 1:26-52 A SPECIAL MAIDEN

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated unto you; and then use us, we pray, as you will, but always to your glory and the welfare of your people, through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. [ELW #351]*

Read Luke 1:26-38 — the Annunciation.

- (1) Stories about divine or angelic tidings of the birth of special children were not uncommon in Judaism (see the announcements of Ishmael and Isaac in Genesis 16:7-14, 17:1-22, 18:1-15, and of Samson in Judges 13:1-25) as well as in the Greco-Roman world (for example, an imperial ruler in Virgil's *Fourth Eclogue*). What is special about Gabriel's message to Mary?
- (2) On the one hand, Jesus will be a descendant of King David *via* Joseph (see also Luke 3:23 & 31); on the other hand, he will be the Spirit-conceived son of God born of the virgin Mary. Do you see any contradiction in these two ideas?
- (3) The promise that the child will rule on the throne of David forever (see 2 Samuel 7:1/11-17) sounds like a political claim. If so, whose reign would be threatened thereby (see Luke 1:5, 2:1, & 3:1)? Is the rule of Jesus a challenge to present-day political systems?

Read Luke 1:39-45 — the Visitation.

- (4) Count how many times "greetings" and "blessings" and "joy" are repeated here. Clearly Luke wants to reflect the happiness which two expectant mothers would share, even though (or, especially because) their pregnancies were so unusual. Reflect on what special relationships bring joy to your life.

Read Luke 1:46-56 — the Magnificat.

- (5) Mary's hymn (perhaps modeled after Hanna's song in 1 Samuel 2:1-10) does not mention their pregnancies or the impending birth of their sons. The first part (vv. 46-50) praises God for the favor and mercy bestowed on her and all God-fearers throughout the ages. What evidences of divine mercy and favor do you find in your own family and country?
- (6) The second half of the hymn (vv. 51-55) strikes a more polemical note. The proud, the powerful and the rich are demoted; the lowly and hungry are promoted. Does this piece of social commentary ring true to your experience in today's world?
- (7) The picture of Mary in these verses has long served as a model for Christians, especially for women. She is not so much "the queen of heaven" as she is the embodiment of piety and purity. Do you find this model attractive? Is it liberating? Or constricting?

* All prayers are from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Leaders Desk Edition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), pp. 60-160.

TRIBUTES TO A BELOVED GODDESS

The best-known work of Apuleius (c. 125 - c. 180 CE), a Roman philosopher and satirist from North Africa, is a bawdy novel entitled *Metamorphoses*, also known as *The Golden Ass*. Its hero Lucius dabbles in magic and is transformed into a donkey; after dozens of misadventures he is finally restored to human form by the goddess Isis. Apuleius himself was initiated into Isis' mystery religion, and Lucius' doxology to her is an expression of religious devotion common throughout the Greco-Roman world.

[Bk. 11, par. 1345] *O holy and abiding Savior of the human race! Ever bountiful in your kindness to mortals, you bring a tender mother's love to those who brave adversity. There passes not a single day, a restful night, nor one brief moment that is bereft of your beneficence.*

On land and sea you guard humanity. With saving hand outstretched you still the storms of life. The tightly intertwining threads of fate you separate. You still the stormy blasts of Fortune and curb the bane-filled movements of the stars. The gods above hold you in honor, and the deities below revere you. . . .

Yet my own skill is far too weak to register your praise, and my estate too poor to satisfy your altar's need of sacrifice. I feel to the depths your majesty, but lack full-throated utterance. And truth to tell, a thousand mouths and thousand tongues to fill the same with an endless file of unwearied words would not suffice. In beggarment one course is left to me, devoted as I am: deeply engraved within my heart I shall forever hold in store your countenance divine and treasure your most holy godhead. [LCL, vol. 453]

The goddess Isis was one of the main deities of Egypt. She was worshiped as the one who raised her husband and brother Osiris from death, as part of the annual rituals associated with the falling and rising of the Nile. Her cult spread throughout the Mediterranean world and was so popular it could not be eliminated until the mid-500s CE, well into the Christian era. The following inscription, chiseled in the side of a stone temple in southern Thrace, is the expression of someone whose eyesight was restored by the goddess.

[lines 6-13] *Therefore, O Isis, even as you heeded my prayers in behalf of my eyes, so answer my second plea and come to hear your praises, for when I behold your beauty with these eyes that have seen the sun I have far more to say than what my eyes have seen and I am filled with confidence that you will ever be near; for if, when I pleaded with you to come in behalf of my health, would you fail to come in behalf of your own honor? So then I take courage and proceed to say the rest, knowing that the inspiration for a eulogy comes from God, but the hand of human beings write it.*

[14-21] *Now first I shall speak of your lineage, and I shall make the beginning of your generation the beginning of my eulogy. They say that Earth became the Mother of everything. She is in truth the first one, and you are her daughter. Then you took Sarapis as your consort, and when you instituted marriage for all to share, the world brightened because of your countenance and fell under the watchful eyes of Helios and Selene. But of you are, it is true, invoked by humanity under many names, but in the course of life we know that you are only two. Yet how difficult it is to recite eulogies when so many gods can lay claim to sacred praise.*

[23-24] *She, together with Hermes, discovered letters. And of the letters some are sacred ones, for the initiated; others are ordinary, for the general populace.*

[25-26] *She founded justice so that, even as death spells equality for us all, we might know how to live together on equal terms.*

[43] *She decreed that life is to come from a man and a woman. . . .*

[Frederick W. Danker, *Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field* (St. Louis: Clayton, 1982), inscription no. 26]

- Compare these descriptions of Isis with Luke's portrait of Mary. Which is more "religious"?
- How might a Roman citizen familiar with the worship of Isis picture the mother of Jesus?
- Is such lofty praise of the goddess beneficial to women in general? Or not?

SECOND SESSION — LUKE 2:1-21

A SPECIAL BABY

Faithful God, you sent your incarnate Word as the sun of justice to shine upon all the world. Open our eyes to see your gracious hand in all your works, that, rejoicing in your whole creation, we may learn to serve you with gladness, for the sake of him through whom all things were made, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. [ELW #464]

Read Luke 2:1-7.

- (8) Luke sets this story at the time of Emperor Augustus, the adopted son of Julius Caesar and ruler of the Roman world. He came into power after a bloody civil war, and then called Julius Caesar a “god” and himself a “son of god.” Why do you suppose Luke mentions Augustus in the setting of the story of Jesus’ birth?
- (9) In the Old Testament the “city of David” most often refers to Jerusalem, but here the reference is to Bethlehem, one of the “little clans of Judah” (see Micah 5:2). Why do you think Luke makes this change?
- (10) What, do you think, might be the significance of the fact that Jesus was born and placed in a manger?

Read Luke 2:8-14.

- (11) King David was a shepherd, and in the Old Testament kings are often referred to as “shepherds of the people.” However, in New Testament times, shepherds were sometimes thought to be shiftless and dishonest. Why do you think the angel brings the news first to sheep herders?
- (12) The first thing the angel says is “Do not be afraid,” even though he is bringing good news. Have you ever been afraid when you first heard some good news? When? And why?
- (13) The angel announces the birth of a “savior” who will bring “peace.” Imagine what the shepherds might have thought when they heard about “peace on earth.” What do you think about?

Read Luke 2:15-20.

- (14) Contrast the reactions of the shepherds and of Mary. They ran to tell the news; she “kept all these things in her heart.” Both reactions are valuable. When have you felt compelled to share good news, and when have you felt more like keeping the news to yourself?

Read Luke 2:21.

- (15) Being circumcised on the eighth day marks a Jewish boy as a genuine “son of the covenant.” What, if anything, identifies you as a true child of God?
- (16) In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare asks: “What’s in a name? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” Yet names *are* important. What is the significance of Jesus’ name? Does your name affect the way you think of yourself?

LETTER AND DECREE HONORING THE BIRTHDAY OF AN EMPEROR

The ancients considered the birthday of a ruler a significant event. This inscription from ca. 7 BCE contains a letter and a decree from Paulus Fabius Maximus, the proconsul of Asia, to the Provincial Assembly. He argues that the birthday of Caesar Augustus began a new era for humanity and should therefore become the start of their official year.

[lines 4-12] *It is subject to question whether the birthday of our divine Caesar spells more of joy or blessing, this being a date that we could probably without fear of contradiction equate with the beginning of all things, if not in terms of nature, certainly in term of utility, seeing that he restored stability, when everything was collapsing and falling into disarray, and gave a new look to the entire world that would have been most happy to accept its own ruin had not the good and common fortune of all been born: CAESAR. Therefore people might justly assume that his birthday spells the beginning of life and real living and marks the end and boundary of any regret that they had themselves been born.*

[32-42] *WHEREAS Providence that orders all our lives has in her display of concern and generosity in our behalf adorned our lives with the highest good: Augustus, whom she has filled with virtue for the benefit of humanity, and has in her beneficence granted us and those who will come after us [a Savior] who has made war to cease and who shall put everything in order, and whereas Caesar transcended the expectations of all, not only by surpassing the benefits conferred by his predecessors but by leaving no expectation of surpassing him to those who would come after him, with the result that the birthday of our God signaled the beginning of God News for the world because of him. . . .*

[50-51] . . . [therefore] the Greeks in Asia DECREED that the New Year begin for all the cities on September 23, which is the birthday of Augustus. . . . [Danker, *Benefactor*, no. 33]

- How might Greco-Roman readers of Luke's gospel have understood phrases such as "Savior," "Lord," "peace on earth, good will to men" and the like?
- What are the *political* implications of Luke's account of Jesus' birth?

The story of Mary and Joseph with the baby Jesus bedded in a feed trough did not start out as a Christmas story, because when St. Luke wrote his gospel there was no Christmas celebration! In fact, Christians did not start commemorating the birth of the Christ Child at the winter solstice until some 300 years after his birth. So how did Luke's first readers use this story? When did they read it? How would it have sounded to their neighbors?

In all likelihood, they would have heard it as a subversive political tract. It was not too blatant, to be sure, but neither was it thinly disguised. Luke used the conventions of Roman propaganda to announce the arrival on the world scene not of an imperial Caesar but of a Lord of a different stripe. From place to place throughout the Mediterranean world you can still see inscriptions chiseled in stone which speak of the birth of Caesar Augustus as "the beginning of good news," which extol him as "Savior" and "Lord" and "our God," and which express thanks for the "peace" he has established throughout the "entire world."

Popular legends which told how the births of great leaders took place in humble surroundings, or how they were attended by auspicious oracles and celestial spectacles, or how they were destined for greatness were commonplace. Every literate person in the Roman Empire knew how to interpret stories like these.

It may be all but impossible for historians to pinpoint exactly when the reigns of Roman Emperor Augustus, Syrian Governor Quirinius and Jewish King Herod overlapped in the way Luke suggests. Also, an empire-wide census that would require all citizens to travel to their ancestral hometowns is entirely improbable. But when Luke pulls these features together to introduce the story of Jesus' birth, his first audience would have known they were reading a political manifesto couched in the rhetoric of traditional images.

Thus the announcement of Jesus' arrival on the world scene is also a piece of "good news," suggests Luke. It is announced by heavenly heralds and witnessed by bucolic sheep herders. He, too, is a "Savior" and "Lord," who hails from a royal village, and whose mission is to bring "peace" throughout the "inhabited world." In other words, the birth of the "Christ"—another royal title—signals the presence of an alternative to the established system of ruling authority.

In short, this story makes a political statement. It's not as though Jesus will be a competitor for Caesar's office within the normal categories of political power. Rather, it more than suggests his presence and praxis will challenge—and ultimately undermine—the values which undergird the business of politics as usual.

THIRD SESSION — LUKE 2:22-52 VISITS TO A TEMPLE

God of grace, you have given us minds to know you, hearts to love you, and voices to sing your praise. Fill us with your Spirit, that we may celebrate your glory and worship you in spirit and truth, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. [ELW #254]

Read Luke 2:22-24.

- (17) Joseph, Mary and Jesus are pictured here as a “Holy Family.” That is, they fulfill the requirements of the Law (see Exodus 13:2, Leviticus 12:8, Numbers 6:10) within the temple courts in Jerusalem. When we present our children for baptism, are we similarly affirming that we as a family are God’s holy people?

Read Luke 2:25-35 — the Nunc Dimittis.

- (18) Their ritual is interrupted by the arrival of Simeon—an old, devout, Spirit-inspired layman, who has been awaiting the Christ or Messiah. His prayer—appropriate for the end of a life as well as for the end of a day—praises God for the blessings of “peace,” “salvation,” “revelation” and “glory.” Imagine what this might mean for an individual person. Then imagine what this could mean for the people as a whole, as a political entity, as a nation.
- (19) After praising God, Simeon blesses Jesus’ parents (but not their child!) and then predicts to Mary that her child will cause dissension among the people and personal suffering for herself. From what you know of the rest of Luke’s story, how will this come true?

Read Luke 2:36-39.

- (20) Another old person, a “prophetess” named Anna (like the mothers of Samuel in 1 Samuel 1:2 and Tobias in Tobit 1:20) appears and praises God for “the redemption of Jerusalem.” “Redemption” here suggests the liberation of the nation (see Isaiah 43:1-4, 49:26, 54:5-8). Again, consider both the personal and the political implications of Jesus’ arrival.

Read Luke 2:40-52.

- (21) Only Luke relates this incident from Jesus’ childhood. On the one hand, his typically pre-teen behavior—going awol and sassing his mother—emphasizes his humanity. On the other hand, his “wisdom (*sophia*) beyond his years” (see vv. 40 & 52) suggests something more. In our culture, how highly do we value wisdom and understanding (as opposed to mere technical knowledge)?
- (22) Mary says, “Your father and I . . .” Jesus says, “. . . my father’s affairs.” Identify the tension between these two comments, and “keep these words in your heart.” What do you suppose Luke is suggesting about Jesus? About us? How do you suppose this will play out in the rest of this gospel?

THE TEMPLE IN JERUSALEM

Every city of any size in the Mediterranean world had one or more temples. Usually they were not overly large, about 30 yards long by 15 yards wide, although a few could be the size of a football field. They normally contained three rooms—a front porch gathering space, a central room for the image of the god, and a rear storage room which could house the temple treasury—surrounded by a pillared walkway.

The temple in Jerusalem was probably the largest in the Roman Empire. In 20/19 BCE King Herod the Great undertook to completely rebuild and renovate the temple area. The project was not completed until 63 CE, just a few years before it was destroyed by the Roman armies in 70. The temple itself was surrounded by courtyards with walls 345 yards long on the north, 500 on the east, 305 on the south, and 530 on the west.

Philo Judaeus (c. 30/20 BCE-c. 50 CE) was a prominent member of a priestly family in Alexandria, Egypt, a political leader in the city's Jewish community, and a Hellenistic philosopher. In his treatise *On the Embassy to Gaius* (also known as Caligula, emperor from 37 to 41 CE) Philo attempted to convince the monarch not to infringe on Jewish traditions and institutions, especially those associated with the temple in Jerusalem.

[par. 209-212] . . . *the Jews would willingly endure to die not once but a thousand times, if it were possible, rather than allow any . . . prohibited actions to be committed. For all men guard their own customs, but this is especially true of the Jewish nation. Holding that the laws are oracles vouchsafed by God and having been trained in this doctrine from their earliest years, they carry the likeness of the commandments enshrined in their souls. Then as they contemplate their forms thus clearly represented they always think of them with awe.*

And those of other races who pay homage to them they welcome no less than their own countrymen, while those who either break them down or mock at them they hate as their bitterest foes. And such dread is inspired by each of the pronouncements that they would never purchase what men deem good fortune or happiness, whichever name is right, by transgressing even in the slightest matters.

Still more abounding and peculiar is the zeal of them all for the temple, and the strongest proof of this is that death without appeal is the sentence against those of other races who penetrate into its inner confines. For the outer are open to everyone wherever they come from. [LCL, vol. 379]

Philo's reference to a sentence of "death without appeal" is confirmed by an inscription on an excavated portion of the temple wall discovered in 1871:

No non-Jew shall enter foot beyond the fence and the enclosure that rings the temple. And whoever is caught will have himself to blame for his ensuing death. [Danker, *Benefactor*, p. 44]

- Why do you suppose it was important for Luke to include two stories in which Jesus' family brought him into the temple at Jerusalem?
- What would these temple stories imply for Greco-Roman readers?
- In the first story, Jesus is welcomed into the temple precincts by venerable elders; in the second he is dialoguing precociously with the temple administrators. What, from a Greco-Roman perspective, would this suggest about him?

FOURTH SESSION — LUKE 4:14-30

A NEW MINISTRY

Look with mercy, gracious God, upon people everywhere who live with injustice, terror, disease, and death as their constant companions. Rouse us from our complacency and help us to eliminate cruelty wherever it is found. Strengthen those who seek equality for all. Grant that everyone may enjoy a fair portion of the abundance of the earth; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. [ELW #351]

Read Luke 4:14-20.

- (23) Jesus' arrival in his hometown was highly anticipated because people had heard reports of his teaching throughout the surrounding countryside. Notice that "he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, *as was his custom.*" Do you have a picture of Jesus taking time for weekly synagogue services? Does it matter to you that he did this? Why, or why not?
- (24) Jesus reads from a scroll of the prophet **Isaiah 61:1-2**. Look it up, and notice that "and the day of the vengeance of our God" is missing from the middle of verse 2. Why do you suppose Jesus (or the author of Luke) chose not to include these words?

Read Luke 4:21-27.

- (25) The people are amazed at Jesus' "gracious words." This could simply mean that he spoke well, or it could mean that he spoke "words of grace." Which do you think it is? Does it matter?"
- (26) Jesus tells the congregation that they expect him to do miracles "as he did in Capernaum," although no miracles have been mentioned so far in the story. Then he gives two biblical examples of miracles: Elijah rescued a widow at Zarephath during a famine (see 1 Kings 17:8-24), and Elisha healed Naaman of his leprosy (see 2 Kings 5:1-19). What do these two have in common? Why did these examples make the people angry?
- (27) What lessons can we learn from these Old Testament stories? About faith? About God's mercy? About our mission? About foreigners?

Read Luke 4:28-30.

- (28) The people in the synagogue are so angry they drive Jesus out and nearly throw him over a cliff! What made them so angry? Have you ever heard something from a leader or a pastor which made you angry? What was it?
- (29) Shortly before this, the devil had tempted Jesus to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple and make God catch him (see Luke 4:9-13). Here he is rushed to the edge of a cliff, but narrowly averts disaster. Is this a miraculous escape? Why do you suppose Luke tells us that Jesus gets away without mishap?

THE ATTITUDE OF A NEW TEACHER

Arrian of Nicomedia (in northwestern present-day Turkey; c. 86-160 CE) was a Roman historian who wrote in Greek and who held numerous political appointments, especially under Emperor Hadrian. He studied philosophy under the Stoic Epictetus and wrote eight books summarizing his mentor's teachings.

Epictetus himself (55-135 CE), was born a slave in Phrygia (present day Turkey), was freed and taught in Rome until Emperor Domitian banished all philosophers from the city; he then spent the rest of his life at Nicopolis in northwestern Greece, where he founded a philosophical school. He lived out the principles of Stoicism in a simple, self-disciplined life, similar to that of the Cynics. The following sample from Book III of Arrian's *Discourses of Epictetus* summarizes his advice to anyone who wants to become a teacher or philosopher.

[III.xxii.19-25] *In the first place, then, you must make your governing principle pure, and you must make the following your plan of life: "From now on my mind is the material with which I have to work, as the carpenter has his timbers, the shoemaker his hides; my business is to make the right use of my impressions. My paltry body is nothing to me; the parts of it are nothing to me. Death? Let it come when it will, whether it be the death of the whole or some part. Exile? And to what place can anyone thrust me out? Outside the universe he cannot. But wherever I go, there are sun, moon, stars, dreams, omens, my converse with gods."*

In the next place, the true Cynic, when he is thus prepared, cannot rest contented with this, but he must know that he has been sent by Zeus to men, partly as a messenger, in order to show them that in questions of good and evil they have gone astray, and are seeking the true nature of the good and the evil where it is no, but where it is they never think; and partly, in the words of Diogenes, when he was taken off to Philip, after the battle of Chaeronica, as a scout. For the Cynic is truly a scout, to find out what things are friendly to men and what hostile; and he must first do his scouting accurately and on returning must tell the truth, not driven by fear to designate as enemies those who are not such, nor in any other fashion be distraught or confused by his external impressions.

[LCL, vol. 218]

- Some scholars have noticed that in many respects Jesus looks like an itinerant Cynic! Note some similarities: both thought of themselves as sent by God; both were teachers; both appeared unafraid of death. Can you think of other similarities?
- In what ways was Jesus not like a Greek philosopher?
- How might a Greco-Roman reader of Luke's gospel have pictured Jesus as he preached in his hometown synagogue?

FIFTH SESSION — LUKE 6:12-49

SOME NEW DISCIPLES

Living God, in Christ you make all things new. Transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace, and in the renewal of our lives make known your glory, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. [ELW #41]

Read Luke 6:12-16 & 17-19.

- (30) Jesus' appointment of the Twelve takes place on a "mountain" after a night in "prayer" "Disciples" are renamed "apostles." Reflect on any important decisions you may have made after an extended time in prayer.
- (31) Just as Moses descended Mount Sinai to address the people (see Exodus 19:14), so Jesus descends to the plain to minister to three groups: (a) the Twelve, (b) a larger group of disciples, and (c) a crowd of Jews and Gentiles. Could this reflect (a) the leaders of (b) the church and (c) the citizens of the empire in Luke's day? In our day?

Read Luke 6:20-26.

- (32) Almost all of Luke's "Sermon on the Plain" can be found in Matthew's longer "Sermon on the Mount" (see Matthew 5:1-7:29). The first section—of beatitudes and woes—divides humankind into two groups: the poor, hungry, grieving and persecuted ones *versus* the rich, satiated, laughing and popular ones. Is it accurate to divide our society today along these terms? If so, where do we fit? And if so, what does this imply about our ministry?

Read Luke 6:27-38.

- (33) The sermon's middle section is a series of directives for living as authentic disciples. Most important are the repeated command to "love your enemies" (vv. 27 & 35) and the so-called Golden Rule (v. 31). Realistically, are we able to follow these suggestions (obey these orders?) in our personal lives today? In the world of international politics?
- (34) List the dozen other specific directions in this section. Are they applicable to us today? Can we practice them in our social and community affairs?

Read Luke 6:39-49.

- (35) The last section of the sermon contains a series of comparisons. List all the contrasts between good and evil in here. Note whether this matches anything in the first section.
- (36) Can you see the humor in the exaggerated contrast between a splinter and a log in one's eye? How would you apply this to yourself? In your congregation? In your community?
- (37) Finally, it all comes back to our relationship with Jesus as our Lord, doesn't it? And the issue is whether we are building solid foundations which will withstand opposition. So, are you? Are we?

THE ENLISTMENT OF A DISCIPLE

Lucius Flavius Philostratus (c. 170-250 CE) studied and taught at Athens and later settled in Rome, where he became part of the circle of friends surrounding emperor Septimus Severus and his wife Julia Domna. Philostratus's earliest work, written between 217 and 238 CE, is his novelistic *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, a Pythagorean philosopher and teacher who lived a century earlier.

Apollonius himself (3 BCE – 97 CE) was a contemporary of Jesus and the early apostles (although, of course, their paths never crossed). As a young man he adopted the three-stage role of an ascetic Pythagorean philosopher: first he underwent a rite of purification, then he endured a five-year period of silent contemplation, and finally he entered into an itinerant mission of teaching and miraculous healings. His journeys to seek and share greater wisdom took him as far as the Hindu sages of India and the Ethiopian gymnosophists of upper Egypt. His expanding fame brought him into contact, and in some cases conflict, with the Roman Emperors Nero, Titus and Domitian.

The similarities between Apollonius and Jesus are numerous. Both had miraculous births, were youthful prodigies at a temple, exorcised demons, restored dead children, gathered followers and shared intimate knowledge with them, forsook riches, were betrayed by a disciple, mistreated and mocked at their trials, reappeared after dying, and offered their followers life after death.

The parallels between the two extend to the style and subjects of their teaching also. The teachings of both of them have been cast in the form of pronouncement stories. Both assumed the singleness and unity of God, practiced prayer and meditation, appeared critical of perfunctory temple rituals, offered positive and negative ethical instructions, encouraged people to treat each other with care and respect, were invested with honorific titles, and taught that life does not end with death.

This sample from Philostratus's *The Life of Apollonius* tells how Damis became Apollonius' first follower; other disciples recruited later included Demetrius, Timasion and Nilus.

[Bk. I, chap. 19] *And so Apollonius arrived in old Ninus, where there is an idol of barbarian type in the shape of Io the daughter of Inachus, with little horns projecting from her temples and just breaking through. Since Apollonius during his stay showed more knowledge about the idol than the priests and the prophets, Damis of Ninus came to hear him. This is the man whom I mentioned at the beginning as Apollonius's companion, who shared in all his wisdom and preserved many details about the Master [literally, "the Man," here and elsewhere].*

Struck with admiration and eager to share his journey, he said, "Let us go, Apollonius, you following God and I following you, for you might find me very valuable. I may not know anything else, but I have been to Babylon; and, having returned from there recently, I know all the cities there are and the villages, in which there are many good things, and moreover I know every one of the barbarian languages. The Armenians have one, the Medes and Persians another, the Cadusians another, and I understand them all." "But I, my friend," replied Apollonius, "know them all, and have learned none." [LCL, vol. 16]

- How does Jesus' calling of the Twelve compare with Apollonius' recruitment of Damis? Who takes the initiative? The teacher? Or the follower?
- Would the original readers of Luke's story have felt comfortable thinking of Jesus as an itinerant philosopher?
- Greco-Roman philosophers and their followers often were in contact with important political rulers. How about Jesus and his disciples? How about his followers today?

PARABLES

The stories in the Bible have the power to transform our lives. The stories Jesus told are especially good at challenging and changing us. These stories or parables often engage our imagination in ways that surprise us into sampling what life in God's kingdom must be like.

Jesus' parables are not merely examples of how God works or how we should behave. In fact, sometimes it is nearly impossible to draw a moral or lesson from the story.

Parables are the most characteristic feature of Jesus' teaching. While others, both in the Jewish world and in the Hellenistic environment, used *meshalim*, comparisons, fables, illustrative anecdotes and the like to embellish their teaching, none of these exactly match Jesus' use of parables. Some maintain that studying his parables is the quickest entree into contact with the historical Jesus himself.

The old Sunday School definition of a parable as "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning" is clearly inadequate, of course. However one may view Jesus' parables, they are not mere homey anecdotes told to illustrate deeper theological truths.

Rather, they are striking metaphors which tease their auditors' imaginations and force them to make a decision. In large measure they may account for the impact of his personality, which some obviously admired and which others apparently detested.

The effect of the parables is due in large part to the way Jesus tells them. He starts his story innocently enough, with an ordinary, even innocuous introduction: "A farmer went out to sow his seed," "A man had two sons," "If you had a hundred sheep and lost one," etc.

But before he finishes, he introduces an anomaly (he "ups the ante") and gives the story a twist (he throws in a "zinger") and forces us to think about what has happened and to decide on (we have to "vote" for or against) what we have heard.

More often than not, Jesus' parables contain some

unexpected twist which challenges our preconceived notions and entices us into rethinking our values. How we respond to these tales will inevitably impact our faith and our life together.

When we read his parables and apply them to our own lives, we instinctively ask how they make a difference for us as individuals and as families. Suppose we were to enlarge our vision to ask how Jesus' stories can impact our larger cultural and social lives.

From such a broader perspective we might rediscover the values we share with each other in our neighborhoods. We might learn that Jesus' values are the values we want to promote in our public lives.

Much of the political rhetoric we hear today is based on the assumption that our resources are limited and in scarce supply. The effect is to entice us to think of ourselves as consumers who are in competition with others. The result is we turn inward and become anxious.

But such myths of scarcity and isolation and fear need not dominate our lives.

We may find that Jesus' message of abundance and hope and community are precisely the values we want to promote in ways which will enhance the common good of all our neighbors throughout our communities.

The selection of parables chosen for this study reflect such values. They all come from a ten-chapter section of Luke's Gospel which is devoted to Jesus' journey from northern Galilee (where his ministry began) to southern Judea (where he died outside Jerusalem).

Although we will focus on the parables themselves, it would be a good idea to read the entire section, Luke 9:51-18:30, to appreciate the larger context in which these stories appear.

The notes which follow may help us get into the texts, but the questions we raise do not necessarily have right or wrong answers. Both are designed to provoke reflection and discussion.

FAMOUS FABLES

Teachers have always used stories to illustrate their truths. Perhaps the most widely and well known were the fables—short anecdotes with a moral, featuring plants or animals which are able to talk and have other human characteristics—attributed to Aesop. Aesop, originally from Thrace and later a freed slave on the island of Samos, lived in the early 6th century BCE. Demetrius of Phalerum in the late 4th century BCE was the first to collect Aesop's prose fables. In the late 1st century CE—and therefore contemporaneous with the authors of the New Testament gospels—Barbruius, a Hellenized Italian, rendered the fables in poetic verses.

No. 4 – The Fisherman and the Fish – *A fisherman drew in the net which he had cast a short time before and, as luck would have it, it was full of all kinds of delectable fish. But the little ones fled to the bottom of the net and slipped out through its many meshes, whereas the big ones were caught and lay stretched out in the boat. It's one way to be insured and out of trouble, to be small; but you will seldom see a man who enjoys a great reputation and has the luck to evade all risks.*

No. 5 – The Fighting Roosters – *A fight took place between two roosters of the Tanagraea breed, whose spirit, they say, is like that of men. The one that was worsted, being covered with wounds, ducked into a corner of the house overcome by shame; the other without delay leaped upon the housetop and flapping his wings crowed loudly. But an eagle lifted him off the roof and flew away with him. Then the other rooster proceeded to tread the hens with impunity, having a better reward for his defeat than his rival for the victory. You too, man, never be boastful when fortune elevates you above another. Many have been saved by the very fact of not succeeding.*

No. 19 – The Fox and the Grapes – *Some bunches of grapes were hanging from a dark-colored vine on a hillside. A crafty fox, seeing the clusters so fully laden, tried with many a leap to reach the dangling purple fruit; for it was ripe indeed and ready for the vintage. After toiling in vain and being unable to reach it, he went away beguiling his grief with these words: "The grapes are sour, not ripe as I supposed."*

No. 53 – Three True Statements – *A hapless fox, having met with a wolf, begged him to spare her life and not to kill so old a creature. "By Pan, I'll spare you," said the wolf, "if you will tell me three true things." "First, said the fox, "I wish you'd never met me; second, I wish you were blind, now that you have met me; and third and last, may you not live through the year, lest you meet with me again."*

No. 64 – The Fir Tree and the Bramble – *The fir tree and the bramble vied with one another. The fir tree praised herself in many ways: "I'm handsome, tall, and well-proportioned. I grow straight up; my top is neighbor to the clouds. I am the main pillar of the house, and the keel of the ship. How can you, a thistle, with so great a tree compare yourself?" The bramble answered her and said: "If you will call to mind the axes that are always cleaving you, to be a bramble will seem better even in your reckoning." Every distinguished man not only has greater fame than lesser men but he also undergoes greater dangers.*

No. 77 – The Fox and the Crow – *A crow, holding in his mouth a piece of cheese, stood perched aloft. A crafty fox who hankered for the cheese deceived the bird with words to this effect: "Sir Crow, thy wings are beautiful, bright and keen thine eye, thy neck a wonder to behold. An eagle's breast thou dost display, and with thy talons over all the beasts thou canst prevail. So great a bird thou art; yet mute, alas, and without utterance." On hearing this flattery the crow's heart was puffed up with conceit, and, dropping the cheese from his mouth, he loudly screamed: "Caw! Caw!" The clever fox pounced on the cheese and tauntingly remarked: "You were not dumb, it seems, you have indeed a voice; you have everything, Sir Crow, except brains."*

[LCL, vol. 436]

- As you read Jesus' parables, see if you can find any similarities between them and Aesop's fables.
- And also take note of the obvious differences!
- By the way, did you know there are two fables in the Bible, at Judges 9:8-15 and 2 Kings 14:9? Compare them with No. 64 above.

SIXTH SESSION — LUKE 10:25-37
A TRAVELER AND A SAMARITAN

Holy God, you are just in all your ways and your commandments are the greatest of treasures. Teach us to love you with all our hearts and to love our neighbors as ourselves, for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. [ELW #564]

Read Luke 10:25-28.

- (38) The lawyer or scribe who questions Jesus is a man trained to copy and study the law of Moses—not just the Ten Commandments, but all the legal regulations in the Old Testament. He asks what he should *do* to *inherit* eternal life. Do you feel any tension between the idea of “doing” something and “inheriting” something?
- (39) The connection between loving God and loving one’s neighbor (Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18) is affirmed several times in the gospels (see Matthew 25:34-40, Mark 12:28-34). In fact, loving our neighbor may be the best way we have of showing our love for God! Suppose their roles had been reversed and Jesus had asked the scribe (who was a professional theologian), “Who is your neighbor?” How do you suppose the lawyer would have answered?

Read Luke 10:29-37.

- (40) Jesus’ story about a man who befriended a traveler in distress is usually called the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The priest and Levite who bypassed the man who had been beaten and robbed were both religious leaders who should have been quick to offer help. The third man along could have been an ordinary Israelite. Instead, Jesus surprises us by making the third man a Samaritan. The Samaritans, who lived in the territory between Galilee and Judea, were near relatives of the Jewish people, who often despised them as half-breed outsiders whose religious practices were suspect. If Jesus were telling the story to us today, whom might he cast in the role of the Samaritan?
- (41) Notice how the Samaritan puts the needs of the wounded traveler ahead of his own— medicating his wounds, transporting him to shelter, paying for his care. What comparable ministries might we undertake to show compassion for others in need?
- (42) The lawyer’s initial question was an attempt to determine “who does or does not qualify to be my neighbor.” Jesus’ concluding question turns it around and challenges us to ask ourselves, “How can I qualify to be a neighbor?” Answer that one!
- (43) “Go and do likewise,” says Jesus. His story is clearly meant to provide a model for how we should live and befriend others in our community. The man walking from Jerusalem to Jericho was a victim of robbery and assault. How does our community help people who are victims of crime?
- (44) Wouldn’t it be better if we could prevent crime in the first place? What could or should we and our neighbors be doing better in this regard?

DECREE HONORING A CIVIC BENEFACTOR

In 1842 archaeologists working in the ruins of Rhodiapolis in Lycia (along the southern coast of present-day Turkey) discovered the remains of a monument which had been placed in front of the theater. One of the longest inscriptions found anywhere, it is dedicated to a millionaire philanthropist named Opramoas, who received repeated honors from 114 to 153 CE. Grateful citizens awarded him gold crowns and bronze statues and honorary citizenships because of his generosity. He paid for the construction of many public buildings, for example, and spent enormous sums for relief efforts following a disastrous earthquake. The following three excerpts from the inscription give a good sampling of Opramoas' good deeds and the honors he received.

[VI.21.70-84] *The Lycian League and the Senate honored Opramoas, the son of Apollonios II and great-grandson of Kalliades, citizen of Rhodiapolis and Korydalla and a wonderful human being, a magnanimous person, from one of the oldest families, and awarded him the right to wear the purple for life, to have front seating, and to enjoy annual honors, in recognition of his admirable service as archphylax and of his gift to the province in the amount of 55,000 denarii, whose interest could be applied to the maintenance of the College of Electors and the rest of the provincial staff—an honorand who previously received from the League first and second and third and fourth honors and the right of citizenship in the leading cities, and who enjoyed the endorsement of the imperial governor and procurators.*

[XI.40.1-31] *Imperator Caesar Titus Aelius Hadrianus Antoninus Augustus, son of God Hadrianus, grandson of God Traianus Parthicus, great-grandson of God Nerva, Pontifex Maximus, Tribune for the sixth time, Imperator for the second time, Consul for the third time, Father of his Country, to the Lycian League, greeting. Had Opramoas, the son of Apollonios, been the benefactor of only one city, likely he would have received honor from that city alone but since, as you inform us, he has made contributions of some kind to numerous cities for relief of earthquake victims, it was appropriate for the province to attest him. Eupolemos II served as legate. Good Fortune attend you. From Rome, 22 September.*

[XVI.589.30-51] *WHEREAS Opramoas son of Apollonios II and great-grandson of Kalliades, Lyciarch and one of the leading men in the province, is distinguished for the multitude of his benefactions that he has bestowed and still bestows not only on our province but also on each of the cities in the course of his rebuilding many large structures with the monies he contributed, with the result that he is attested with appropriate honors by all the cities, [be it RESOLVED] that he be honored annually in the province as a whole and in the cities for the outstanding generosity he has displayed in his gifts both to the cities and to our province.*

[Danker, *Benefactor*, no. 19]

- Would Greco-Roman readers of Luke's story about a Samaritan traveler have thought of him as a generous benefactor?
- Would they have known about the antipathy between Jews and Samaritans? Would it have affected their understanding of Jesus' parable?
- Note the contrast: The Samaritan was a personal benefactor; Apollonios was a civic benefactor. Which is better? Which kind are you?

SEVENTH SESSION — LUKE 12:13-21
A WEALTHY FARMER

God of abundance, you have you have poured out a large measure of earthly blessings: our table is richly furnished, our cup overflows, and we live in safety and security. Teach us to set our hearts on you and not these material blessings. Keep us from becoming captivated by prosperity, and grant us in wisdom to use your blessings to your glory and to the service of humankind; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

[ELW #315]

Read Luke 12:13-15.

- (45) For whatever reason, perhaps in order to avoid being caught in someone else's quarrel, Jesus declined to get involved in litigation between siblings over the disbursement of their father's estate. Can you recall any similar situations from your own experience, when you were unwittingly pulled into some else's controversy?
- (46) Apparently Jesus felt that greed was at the center of their quarrel. He reminds us that life is more than possessions. Make a short list of some of the products our TV commercials would like us to believe are essential for life.

Read Luke 12:16-21.

- (47) By most standards, the wealthy farmer in Jesus' story was a wise man: He was not lazy; he prospered; he planned for the future. But in the end God calls him a "fool" (which is why we usually call this the Parable of the Rich Fool). Count the number of times the farmer uses the first-person pronouns "I" and "my." Could this be the reason he was such a fool?
- (48) The farmer's inner dialogue with himself—a familiar feature in several of Luke's parables—ends by quoting part of a popular proverb: "Let us eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may die." (See Ecclesiastes 8:15, Tobit 7:10, 1 Corinthians 15:32.) This, ironically, is exactly what happened! Can you think of any other proverbs that could or should apply to this situation?
- (49) What exactly should we be doing if we want to be "rich toward God," as Jesus suggests?
- (50) This story about a wealthy farmer is ultimately about how we should behave. Or, better yet, about the attitude we should have toward life. Can you define that attitude more precisely? In other words, what sort of values does Jesus promote in this story?
- (51) Instead of hoarding his harvest for his own use, the farmer could have found a way to share his food with those who go hungry. Today an adult needs approximately 2,100 calories a day in order to grow and live, yet across our globe over 1 billion people must try to exist on 1,000 calories a day. What is the problem here? Not enough food? Inadequate transportation?
- (52) If we were serious about ending hunger in our country, much less throughout the world, what steps would we take *politically* to distribute food to those who are starving?

THE VIRTUE OF GENEROSITY

Jesus' parables often touch on the kinds of vices and virtues which are recognized universally. The Greco-Roman world generally recognized that generosity was one of the ethical qualities which are admired among all peoples. Perhaps the most influential work of the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BCE) is his *Nicomachean Ethics* (so named because he dedicated it to his 19-year-old son Nicomachus). Aristotle was a student of Plato and a tutor for Alexander the Great. His *Ethics* has influenced generations of philosophers, including many Medieval Christian theologians.

(Book 4, par. 1-5) *Next let us speak of Generosity. This virtue seems to be the observance of the mean in relation to wealth: we praise a man as generous not in war, nor in matters in which we praise him as temperate, nor in judicial decisions, but in relation to giving and getting wealth, and especially in giving; wealth meaning all those things whose value is measured by money.*

Prodigality and Meanness on the other hand are both of them modes of excess and of deficiency in relation to wealth. Meanness is always applied to those who care more than is proper about wealth.

Prodigality . . . denotes the possessor of one particular vice, that of wasting one's substance; for he who is ruined by his own agency is a hopeless case indeed, and to waste one's substance seems to be in a way to ruin oneself, inasmuch as wealth is the means of life..

[Book 4, par. 6-8] *Now riches are an article of use; but articles of use can be used either well or ill, and he who uses a thing best is he who possesses the virtue related to that thing; therefore that man will use riches best who possesses the virtue related to wealth; and this is the generous man.*

But the use of wealth seems to consist in spending and in giving; getting wealth and keeping it are modes of acquisition rather than of use. Hence the generous man is more concerned with giving to the right recipients than with getting wealth from the right sources and not getting it from the wrong ones.

Virtue is displayed in doing good rather than in having good done to one, and in performing noble acts rather than in avoiding base actions that go with getting.

Again, gratitude is bestowed on a giver, not on one who refrains from taking; and still more is this true of praise.

[LCL, vol. 073]

- How do you suppose a Greco-Roman reader of Luke's gospel would have evaluated the farmer in Jesus' parable? Why?
- Jesus obviously did not think highly of the farmer in his story? Why?
- Obtaining wealth is highly valued in our society today. Is this a virtuous enterprise?
- Our bankers and investment brokers advertise themselves as experts in "wealth management," especially for those who are anticipating their retirement years. What do you think of this?

EIGHTH SESSION — LUKE 14:7-24

A HOST AND HIS GUESTS

Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may move every human heart, that the barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease, and that, with our divisions healed, we might live in justice and peace; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. [ELW #304]

Read Luke 14:7-11.

- (53) In ancient times, just as in our day, the more important guests at a wedding banquet were seated closest to the host at the head table. Jesus' advice, a traditional piece of wisdom lore (see Proverbs 25:6-7), illustrates a proverb about being humiliated or promoted. (The same proverb will appear in the Twelfth Session at Luke 18:14; see item #85.) Have you ever been in a position where you were embarrassed by being suddenly demoted, or where you were honored by being unexpectedly promoted?

Read Luke 14:12-14.

- (54) Unlike his advice to guests, Jesus' instruction to hosts is more dramatic. It defies conventional wisdom, for ordinarily one would not invite social outcasts to a formal dinner party. What would happen at your household if you were to bring "unsavory" strangers home for supper?

Read Luke 14:15-24.

- (55) The remarkable thing about Jesus' story, usually referred to as the Parable of the Great Supper, is that the guests who have previously accepted the invitation find reasons for being absent when dinner was served. Their lame excuses are the sort that would have exempted a faithful Israelite from participating in the armed forces (see Deuteronomy 20:5-9, 24:5; 1 Maccabees 3:56). Think of some of the "good excuses" you have heard for not participating in the fellowship of God's people.
- (56) Twice the frustrated host invites others to replace his feckless friends. First his slaves scour the streets to summon the city's social outcasts; then they traverse the roads out of town for beggars and foreigners. Luke's gospel emphasizes how Jesus' ministry includes people who are marginal and suspect. Do you think the host here models God's agenda?
- (57) Also, Luke's gospel frequently pictures outsiders like these eating together in fellowship with Jesus (see Luke 5:29-32; 7:33-34, 36-50; 9:12-17; 10:38-42; 19:1-10). Do you think this should model the church's fellowship meals, including the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion? In your experience, does it?
- (58) If you connect the first and last verses of this section, Luke 14:15 & 24, you get the idea that dining at the heavenly banquet in the Kingdom of God will be a special treat for those who would not ordinarily qualify to be invited. Where does that leave us? And which social groups should we be inviting to share our fellowship?

CONCERNING WEDDING GUESTS

Weddings have always been important family, social, and even political events, and the guest list is a matter of no small importance; just ask any bride-to-be! Plutarch (c. 46-120 CE), a Greek biographer and moral philosopher, was among those who discussed the matter. His *Moralia*, a collection of 78 essays and speeches on various customs and mores, includes some “Table Talk” conversations on various questions, one of which was: “Why is it customary to invite the most guests to wedding suppers?”

[Book 4.3.1] *At the wedding of my son Autobulus, Sossius Senecio was present in Chaeronea as one of our guests. Among many subjects that he brought forward which were particularly appropriate to the occasion, he raised the question why people invite more guests to wedding dinners than to other parties. For it is true, he observed, that those lawgivers who have campaigned most vigorously against extravagance have particularly sought to limit the number of guests at weddings.*

[He said that the philosopher Hecataeus pointed out that] at their marriage men invite a crowd to the banquet so that there may be many witnesses to testify that the hosts themselves are of good family and that their brides come from good families.

On the other hand, the comic poets attack those who celebrate a wedding in a prodigal and ostentatious style, with splendid dinners and great outlay, as not putting down a secure foundation or looking courageously to the future. . . .

[4.3.2] *“But to avoid what is all too easy, the appearance of accusing others when I myself have nothing to offer, I shall be the first,” he said “to state my view. It is that of all the occasions for a banquet, no one is more conspicuous or talked about than a wedding. . . . a wedding feast betrays us by the loud marriage cry, the torch, and the shrill pipe, things which . . . even the women stand at their door to watch and admire. Consequently, since no one is unaware that we are receiving guests and must have invited them, we include all our relatives, acquaintances, and connections of any degree, because we are afraid to leave anyone out.”*

[4.3.3] *When we had applauded this, Theon took up the thread with these words: “Let us adopt this theory, for it is quite probable. But add, if you will, a further point, that these particular banquets are not merely friendly entertainments but important family occasions, which solemnize the incorporation of a new set of relatives into the family.*

“What is more important than this, at the union of two houses, each father-in-law regards it as a duty to demonstrate good will to the friends and relatives of the other, and so the guest-list is doubled. Besides, many or most of the activities relating to a wedding are in the hands of women, and where women are present it is necessary that their husbands also should be included.”

[LCL, vol. 424]

- Does this conversation describe any weddings you have attended?
- Does it help us understand the background of Jesus’ parable?
- How offensive was it—is it—for guests who have accepted an invitation not to show up at the wedding reception?
- Does this tell us anything about life in the Kingdom of God?

NINTH SESSION — LUKE 15:1-32
A LOST SHEEP & A LOST COIN & TWO LOST SONS

O God, overflowing with mercy and compassion, you lead back to yourself all those who go astray. Preserve your people in your loving care, that we may reject whatever is contrary to you and may follow all things that sustain our life in your Son, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen. [ELW #157]

Read Luke 15:1-7.

- (59) One hundred sheep is four or five times the average size flock in Palestine; a one-percent loss for its wealthy owner would not be devastating. What sense does it make for a man to risk abandoning ninety-nine head in the wilderness just to rescue one stray lamb? Why would one repentant sinner be of greater value than ninety-nine morally upright people?

Read Luke 15:8-10.

- (60) Ten drachmas represented ten days' wages for a laborer. If this is the woman's entire accumulated wealth, she is not a rich person. How she misplaced ten percent of her assets we do not know. No wonder she searches and sweeps so frantically and then celebrates with her girlfriends! Is it any wonder God rejoices when a lost sinner is found?

Read Luke 15:11-24.

- (61) The usual name for this story, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, is misleading. Its moral is not a warning against wasteful spending, which is what "prodigal" means. Rather, it is about the outrageous behavior of the man's *two* sons. The younger son, acting as though he wishes his father were dead, squanders his share of the estate in a foreign land. After nearly starving to death, he finds work as a swineherd—an unspeakable predicament for a Jewish boy. Can you think of any situation in today's society as despicable as this?
- (62) In desperation the boy resolves to return home and work as an indentured servant. But his father interrupts him and—with gifts of ring, robe, sandals and a barbeque—restores him to a place of authority in the family. Do you have to "hit bottom" before you can repent?

Read Luke 15:25-32.

- (63) The elder son's behavior is equally outrageous. Not only does he refuse to welcome back his brother, who was lost and as good as dead, but he even berates his father for his generosity. This is the real point of Jesus' story, directed against those who refuse to forgive and restore those who have offended us. How does this apply to us?
- (64) The father's behavior, too, is outrageous: He hikes up his skirt and runs to greet his returning younger son; he treats him to an extravagant party; he leaves the celebration to plead with his pouting elder son. Jesus' story is open ended; he forces us to imagine how it turned out. Did the elder son ever accept his brother? Did the younger son remain loyal? Does the father's behavior mirror God's behavior toward us? Does it matter?
- (65) Do you find any social or political implications in these stories about "lostness"?

A LETTER FROM A DELINQUENT SON

Among the papyri found in Egypt is this letter from Antonio Longus to his Mother Neilus:

Greetings: I hope you are in good health; it is my constant prayer to Lord Serapis. I did not expect you to come to Metropolis, therefore I did not go there myself. At the same time, I was ashamed to go to Kanaris because I am so shabby. I am writing to tell you that I am naked. I plead with you, forgive me. I know well enough what I have done to myself. I have learned my lesson. I know I made a mistake. I have heard from Posumos who met you in the area of Arsino. Unfortunately, he told you everything. Don't you know that I would rather be a cripple than owe so much as a cent to any man? I plead, I plead with you. . . .

[Signed] Antonios Longus, your son.

[Frederick W. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age* (St. Louis: Clayton, MO, 1972), p. 170]

- Sons who leave home and then come crawling back were not a rarity in the ancient world. How might Greco-Roman readers of Luke's story of the so-called "prodigal son" have interpreted his repentance?
- If you were Mrs. Neilus, how would you respond to Antonio's letter?
- If you were the father in Jesus' story, how would you respond to your younger son? To your older son?

TENTH SESSION — LUKE 16:1-13

A CLEVER MANAGER

O God, in your love you have given the people of this land gifts of abundance beyond what our forebears knew or could imagine. Mercifully grant that we may not be so occupied with material things that we forget spiritual gifts and thus, even though we have gained the whole world, lose our souls; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. [ELW #314]

Read Luke 16:1-8.

- (66) This session and the next center on two stories about money. Each begins with, “There was a rich man.” Here Jesus offers positive advice to his followers. Except, of course, that it doesn’t sound very positive, because it features an “unjust steward.” Why would Jesus use a dishonest accountant as an example for “the children of light” to imitate?
- (67) Some interpreters suggest that when the manager reduces his clients’ bills he is merely discounting his own commission, or perhaps he is eliminating the interest his employer should not have charged in the first place. What do you think?
- (68) Remember, the manager is praised because of his cleverness, not because of his crookedness. Might his employer have been just as unscrupulous in his own dealings?
- (69) The ways lenders grant loans and borrowers pay interest can shape our social structures—sometimes fairly, sometimes unjustly. Think of home mortgages, auto loans, insurance policies, investment portfolios, plastic credit cards, and bankruptcy laws. These items represent economic practices. Are the policies behind these practices equitable? Or not?

Read Luke 16:9-13.

- (70) It is not entirely clear where the parable ends and Jesus’ comments begin. The rich man, his manager, their customers, Jesus, his followers, today’s Christians—which, do you think, are “children of this age,” and which are “children of light”?
- (71) Consider “mammon,” that is, the accumulation of wealth. Can it become a means for getting into “the eternal tents,” as verse 9 suggests? Or is devotion to mammon guaranteed to keep you separated from God, as verse 13 insists?
- (72) Jesus’ sayings about faithfulness in regard to handling one’s wealth in verses 10-12 are not easy to string together logically. When you consider that our personal finances, our state budgets, our federal spending priorities, our ever-increasing national debt, the world bank, and our international economies are all intertwined. . . . Do Jesus’ values have anything to say to these complex social and political and economic issues?
- (73) Are there any forces in play which promote economic prosperity in your neighborhood? Or, conversely, which contribute to poverty in your community?

LEGAL ACTION AGAINST A DISHONEST BUILDER

Dishonest business dealings are nothing new. The following papyrus letter, written in Egypt around 28/29 CE, is a householder's complaint to the police that he has been robbed by the contractor he had engaged to assist with a remodeling project in his home.

To Serapion, chief of police, from Orsenouphis son of Harpaesis, notable of the village of Euhemera in the division of Themistes.

In the month Mesore of the past 14th year of Tiberius Caesar Augustus I was having some old walls on my premises demolished by the mason Petesouchus son of Petesouchus, and while I was absent from home to gain my living, Petesouchus in the process of demolition discovered a hoard which had been secreted by my mother in a little box as long ago as the 6th year of Caesar, consisting of a pair of gold earrings weighing 4 quarters, a gold crescent weighing 3 quarters, a pair of silver armlets of the weight of 12 drachmae of uncoined metal, a necklace with silver ornaments worth 80 drachmae, and 60 silver drachmae.

Diverting the attention of his assistants and my people he had them conveyed to his own home by his maiden daughter, and after emptying out the aforesaid objects he threw away the box empty in my house, and he even admitted finding the box, though he pretends that it was empty.

Wherefore I request, if you approve, that the accused be brought before you for the consequent punishment. Farewell.

Orsenouphis, aged fifty, scar on left forearm.

[LCL, no. 278, vol.282]

- How would people normally judge the character of a man like Petesouchus?
- How would Greco-Roman readers have judged the character of the manager in Jesus' story?
- Can you think of any extenuating circumstances which would change our opinion of either of these dishonest men?

ELEVENTH SESSION — LUKE 16:14-31

A RICH MAN AND POOR LAZARUS

Almighty and most merciful God, we call to mind before you all whom it is easy to forget: those who are homeless, destitute, sick, isolated, and all who have no one to care for them. May we bring help and healing to those who are broken in body or spirit, that they may have comfort in sorrow, company in loneliness, and a place of safety and warmth; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. [ELW #306]

Read Luke 16:14-18.

- (74) The Pharisees would have thought, on the basis of the Law of Moses, that having wealth was a sign that one had obeyed the law and been blessed by God. Jesus, on the other hand, read it differently: Those who prize money as a measure of their self-worth are not living by God's values. On the other hand, do you think that God devalues money?
- (75) The prohibition of divorce and remarriage seems out of place here in a passage about money, unless Jesus has in mind people who divorce their spouses just to marry a "trophy wife" or bag a "sugar daddy." What do you think?

Read Luke 16:19-26.

- (76) Jesus' assessments of his critics come in the form of a second story about a rich man. Note the contrasts: The rich man is anonymous, although he is obviously an important person who lives in a gated community and dresses and eats lavishly. But when he dies, he is buried and that's it. The lame beggar, on the other hand, is dignified with a name, Lazarus, which means "God is my help." This is the only parable in which a character has a name! He is too weak to fend off the feral dogs which lick his open sores. But when he dies angels carry him to the heavenly banquet, where he enjoys a place of honor right next to Abraham. In a social system marked by economic disparities between the "have's" and the "have not's," where do Jesus' sympathies obviously lie?
- (77) Can you recall other passages which reveal the Bible's "preferential option for the poor"?
- (78) Notice how the rich man still tries to take charge and use Lazarus as his errand boy. It works like that in today's world too, doesn't it? People with wealth and power "use" those who are less well off, right?

Read Luke 16:27-31.

- (79) As the rich man dickers with Father Abraham about the fate of his brothers, it becomes clear that even "an apparition from the great beyond" would not make much difference. The scriptural message is clear. Those who refuse to obey the biblical command to care for the poor will have no place in God's kingdom. Consider how this might apply to our society today. What role should these play? Food shelves, soup kitchens, Meals on Wheels, Loaves and Fishes, AFDC, food stamps, school lunches, minimum wage laws, income tax rates, etc. etc.?

TRUE FREEDOM AND INTEGRITY

Ancient philosophers recognized that just because a free citizen enjoys exceptional wealth and privilege is no guarantee that he is good and virtuous. In fact, they argued, true freedom is only possible for those who are free from base desires. Epictetus (see Session 4) discusses the nature of such freedom in one of his *Discourses*.

[Bk. 4.1.1-5] *That man is free, who lives as he wishes, who is proof against compulsion and hindrance and violence, whose impulses are untrammelled, who gets what he wills to get and avoids what he wills to avoid.*

Who then would live in error? No one.

Who would live deceived, reckless, unjust, intemperate, querulous, abject? No one.

No bad man then lives as he would, and so no bad man is free.

Who would live in a state of distress, fear, envy, pity, failing in the will to get and in the will to avoid? No one.

Do we then find any bad man without distress or fear, above circumstance, free from failure?

None. Then we find none free.

[128-131] *Come now and let us review the conclusion we have agreed to. He is free, who none can hinder, the man who can deal with thing as he wishes. But the man who can be hindered or compelled or fettered or driven into anything against his will, is a slave. And who is he whom none can hinder? The man who fixes his aim on nothing that is not his own. And what does "not his own" mean? All that it does not lie in our power to have or not to have, or to have of a particular quality or under particular condition.*

The body then does not belong to us, its parts do not belong to us, our property does not belong to us. If then you set your heart on one of these as though it were your own, you will pay the penalty deserved by him who desires what does not belong to him. The road that leads to freedom, the only release from slavery is this, to be able to say with your whole soul:

Lead me, O Zeus, and lead me, Destiny, Whither ordained is by your decree. [LCL, vol. 218]

The writings of Philo (see Session 3) comprise the largest collection of Greek philosophical writings after Aristotle, and the only surviving collection of Jewish writings outside of Palestine, other than the Mishnah. His Scriptural interpretations are highly allegorical, but his ethical treatises betray Stoic influences. His treatise *Every Good Man Is Free* describes the relationship between virtue and freedom.

[9.59-60] *Therefore, it is not an incorrect assertion that the man who does everything wisely does everything well; and he who does everything well does everything correctly; and he who does everything correctly does everything also in an unerring, and blameless, and irreproachable, and faultless, and beneficial manner: so that he will have free permission to do everything, and to live as he pleases. And he who has this liberty must be free.*

But the virtuous man does do everything wisely; therefore he alone is free. And indeed the man whom it is not possible either to compel to do anything, or to prevent from doing anything, cannot possibly be a slave; and one cannot compel or prevent the virtuous man. Therefore the virtuous man cannot be a slave; and that he is never under compulsion or under any restraint is quite plain; for that man is under restraint who does not obtain what he desires. But the wise man only desires such things as proceed from virtue, in which it impossible for him to be disappointed. [LCL, vol. 363]

- Would Greco-Roman auditor of Luke's gospel have thought of the wealthy man in Jesus' story as virtuous? As free?
- How might they have evaluated Lazarus?
- Do you detect any differences between Epictetus and Philo on the subject of true freedom?
- Are Stoic values such as these helpful for evaluating our own lives today?

TWELFTH SESSION — LUKE 18:1-14
A WIDOW AND A JUDGE & A PHARISEE AND A TAX COLLECTOR

Lord of all, you have declared what is right: to seek justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly before you. Bless judges and courts, juries and law officers throughout our land. Guard them from retribution and from corruption. Give them the spirit of wisdom, that they may perceive the truth and administer the law impartially as instruments of your divine will. We pray in the name of him who will come to be our judge, your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. [ELW #293]

Read Luke 18:2-5.

- (80) These two parables talk about prayer and about how people are “vindicated” or “justified” (it’s the same word). The first story features a judge who violates all the Bible’s standards for jurisprudence. He does not fear God, promote justice or befriend widows (see Deuteronomy 10: 12-13, 17-18; 16:18-20 and Sirach 35:14-17). In your experience, does this mirror the state of affairs in our own criminal justice system?
- (81) The widow’s incessant appeals force the judge to conclude that she will “give him a black eye” if he doesn’t take up her case. So finally he rules in her favor. What can we do today to ensure our courts render fair verdicts in a timely fashion?

Read Luke 18:1 & 6-8.

- (82) Luke uses this story to show how Jesus encouraged his disciples to be persistent in prayer. The argument goes from lesser to greater: If a dishonest judge will eventually hear a petition, God will surely grant his people’s prayers much more quickly. Does this match your own experience in prayer?

Read Luke 18:10-13.

- (83) Note the contrasts in the second prayer story. A Pharisee (mentioned only here in any of Jesus’ parables) would have been admired socially as one who was especially devoted to Torah observance and piety. A tax collector would have been despised as one who extracted revenue for the Roman occupation forces and who likely profited by overcharging his fellow citizens. The idea that both would appear simultaneously to pray in the temple would have seemed ludicrous. What kinds of people today don’t “belong” together?
- (84) Both men stand and pray aloud. One gives thanks sanctimoniously, compares himself favorably to law breakers, and brags about his super-piety. The other merely begs for mercy and acknowledges his status as a “sinner,” that is, as a non-observant Jew. Shockingly, the latter ends up right with God, not the former. Why? Is there a lesson here for us?

Read Luke 18:9 & 14.

- (85) Luke uses this story to show how Jesus encourages personal humility, not self-righteous contempt for others (see item # 53). How can this value translate into the social mores of our community, our state, our nation?

JUDICIAL IMPARTIALITY

Pliny the Younger (actual name, Gaius Plinius Ceacilius Secundus; 61-112 CE), a Roman lawyer and magistrate, is known for hundreds of his surviving letters which give valuable insight into the political practices of his day. He had a reputation for being an honest and moderate person. In this letter he tells how he and his colleague prosecuted a complex case against a corrupt territorial governor and his accomplices.

[letter 3.9.8] *I was counsel for the province; Luceis Albinus was with me. He is a copious and elegant orator; and though we had long been mutually attached, yet being associated with him in this cause, has considerably heightened my affection for him. There is something in the pursuit of fame, especially oratorical fame, that is selfish, unsociable, and jealous of participation; but there was no rivalry between us, and we united our joint efforts in the management of this cause, without going into any separate or private views of our own. We thought the point in question was of too much importance and of too complicated a nature, for each of us to be limited to a single speech.*

[3.9.9] *We were apprehensive we should neither have voice and breath, nor time to make good so many charges against so many parties, if we made one batch of them, so to speak. Such a variety of persons and facts would be apt to confound, as well as weary, the attention of the judges. Again, by this collective indictment, all the defendants would benefit by the popularity of some of their number. Finally, the most powerful parties might get off by making scapegoats of their more humble co-defendants; for partiality never exerts itself with more success than when it is concealed under the specious appearance of severity.* [LCL, vol. 055]

- If Greco-Roman readers shared Pliny's concern for judicial impartiality, how would they have reacted to Luke's story of a woman who almost did not receive fair treatment in court?

Later in his career Pliny was governor of a province in Asia Minor where he presided over the trials of people who had been denounced as Christians. In this letter to Emperor Trajan he asks for directions on how he should proceed, and then summarizes his own procedure.

[letter 10.91] *It is a rule, Sir, which I inviolably observe, to refer myself to you in all my doubts; for who is more capable of guiding my uncertainty or informing my ignorance? Having never been present at any trials of the Christians, I am unacquainted with the method and limits to be observed either in examining or punishing them. . . .*

In the meanwhile, the method I have observed towards those who have been denounced to me as Christians is this: I interrogated them whether they were Christians; if they confessed it I repeated the question twice again, adding the threat of capital punishment; if they still persevered, I ordered them to be executed. For whatever the nature of their creed might be, I could at least feel no doubt that stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy deserved chastisement. There were others also possessed with the same infatuation, but being citizens of Rome, I directed them to be carried thither. . . .

They affirmed, however, the whole of their guilt, or their error, was, that they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food—but food of an ordinary and innocent kind.

Even this practice, however, they had abandoned after the publication of my edict, by which, according to your orders, I had forbidden political associations. I judged it so much the more necessary to extract the real truth, with the assistance of torture, from two female slaves, who were styled "deaconesses": but I could discover nothing more than depraved and excessive superstition. [LCL, vol. 059]

- Legal prosecution of this sort came after the writing of Luke-Acts, but it indicates the direction in which political action could proceed against followers of Jesus. Does this help you understand the political implications of being a Christian?

MIRACLES

The previous section gave us a chance to read some of the stories or parables of Jesus which are in the so-called “travel narrative” in Luke 9:51-18:30. In this section we are considering several stories of Jesus’ miracles which are told in the previous section, Luke 4:14-9:50. It would be a good idea to read the entire section to appreciate the larger context of his successful ministry in the regions around the Sea of Galilee.

Stories of miracles, of course, are notoriously difficult for modern scholars and scientists to deal with from a historical perspective. Given what we know about the “immutable laws of nature,” how can we deal with these reports?

Are we to maintain that God actually interfered in the world of matter and energy to produce results that would not, could not, otherwise have occurred? If so, could such events even be evaluated according to accepted historical criteria?

Alternatively, are we to imagine that a historical or natural or coincidental event lies behind what was later elaborated into a miracle story?

Although dealing with the actual historicity of Jesus’ miraculous healings can be problematical, there can be little doubt that he had a *reputation* as a healer. In other words, the stories of his healings are reliable historical evidence that from early on his followers witnessed healings which they interpreted as miraculous cures. A number of other factors may be helpful here:

One is a distinction between “disease” *versus* “illness” and between “cure” *versus* “healing.” The first in each pair are medical matters. Disease implies the kind of physical disorder that could be diagnosed by a competent physician and then potentially treated and cured through medical science. Illness here suggests more of an emotional or spiritual malady which could be healed in a way which left a person with a sense of wholeness.

Along these lines, we could suppose Jesus was the sort of caring healer who relieved others of their illnesses, without implying that he actually effected miraculous cures of medical diseases.

A *second* factor to consider is that many of the diseases Jesus’ reputedly healed were similar to the kind that can result from what modern psychiatrists would call a case of hysterical blindness or paralysis or an acute mental disorder. Some sociological studies suggest that such disorders are more prevalent in economically distressed environments and in times of war or military occupation.

Along these lines, we could suppose Jesus actually healed disorders of this type without suggesting that they were miraculous cures.

A *third* factor is that the ancients believed the universe was controlled by an extensive network of demonic forces; rescue from their grip required divine intervention. Whatever their actual cause and effect, Jesus’ exorcisms would have been seen as the defeat of demonic powers. If the exorcisms provide the symbolic framework for understanding all the miracle stories, then both the cures of sickness and the nature miracles also imply the defeat of enemy forces.

A *fourth* factor is that stories of miraculous healings were not uncommon in the ancient world. Asclepius, the Greco-Roman god of healing whose popular shrines were scattered throughout the empire, was revered by devotees who called him “the Savior.” Apollonius of Tyana (ca. 3 BCE - 98 CE), an itinerant philosopher who traveled with his disciples throughout the ancient world, also was said to effect miraculous cures, especially exorcisms, from time to time.

Two Jewish holy men, known as Honi the Circle Drawer (ca. 50 BCE) and Hanina ben Dosa (ca. 50 CE), were also reputed to work miracles. The former was adept at bringing rain in times of drought; the latter was a Galilean healer.

When all these considerations are factored in, we are justified in concluding that the historical Jesus was indeed a healer. Whether any of his healings were bonafide miraculous cures may be more difficult—some would say, impossible—to affirm. But within the cultural expectations of his day it is clear that others regarded him as an agent of divine healing.

The stories of Jesus' miracles are not merely examples of how God works in wondrous ways. In fact, the stories themselves often downplay the marvelous impact of his deeds. Rather, his healings especially show how much God cares for "the least, the lost, and the lonely," as some have put it.

When we read these stories and apply them to our own lives, we instinctively ask how they make a

difference for us as individuals and as families.

Suppose we were to enlarge our vision to ask how the stories of Jesus' miracles can impact our larger cultural and social lives. Then we might rediscover the values we share with each other in our neighborhoods and learn that Jesus' values are the values we want to promote in our public lives.

MEDICINE OR MAGIC OR MIRACLE?

The multi-volume *Natural History* of Gaius Plinius Secundus (23-79 CE), known as Pliny the Elder, includes long sections on proper diet and medical practices. Pliny, who served in the Roman military and died in the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, is skeptical of magical or miraculous cures, and prefers natural medications.

[Book 24.1.1,4-5] *Not even the woods and the wilder face of Nature are without medicines, for there is no place where that holy Mother of all things did not distribute remedies for the healing of mankind, so that even the very desert was made a drug store, at every point occurring wonderful examples of that well-known antipathy and sympathy. . . .*

Hence sprang the art of medicine. Such things alone had nature decreed should be our remedies, provided everywhere, easy to discover and costing nothing—the things in fact that support our life. Later on the deceit of men and cunning profiteering led to the invention of the quack laboratories, in which each customer is promised a new lease of his own life at a price.

At once compound prescriptions and mysterious mixtures are glibly repeated, Arabia and India are judged to be storehouses of remedies, and a small sores is charged with the cost of a medicine from the Red Sea, although the genuine remedies form the daily dinner of even the very poorest.

But if remedies were to be sought in the kitchen-garden, or a plant or a shrub where to be procured thence, none of the arts would become cheaper than medicine. [LCL, vol. 393]

[Book 28.3.10-11] *Of the remedies derived from man, the first raises a most important question, and one never settled: have words and formulated incantations any effect? If they have, it would be right and proper to give the credit to mankind.*

As individuals, however all our wisest men reject belief in them, although as a body the public at all times believes in them unconsciously. In fact the sacrifice of victims without a prayer is supposed to be of no effect; without it too the gods are not thought to be properly consulted. [LCL, vol. 418]

[Book 29.1] *The nature of remedies, and the great number of those already described or waiting to be described, compel me to say more about the art of medicine itself. . . . To its pioneers medicine assigned a place among the gods and a home in heaven, and even today medical aid is in many ways sought from the oracle.* [LCL, vol. 418]

- As you read Luke's stories of miraculous cures, ask yourself whether Greco-Roman readers would have thought that Jesus was a magician.
- Is it possible that natural remedies would have been just as effective as magic or miracle?
- Today we sometimes hear about "miraculous medical advances." Is that a contradiction in terms?

THIRTEENTH SESSION — LUKE 4:31-37
A CRAZED MAN IN A SYNAGOGUE & A SICK MOTHER-IN-LAW

Merciful God, you give us the grace that helps in time of need. Surround those in emotional distress with your steadfast love and lighten their burdens. By the power of your Spirit, free them from distress and give them new minds and hearts made whole in the name of the risen Christ. Amen. [ELW #338]

Read Luke 4:31-32.

- (86) This, the first of Jesus' healings, comes immediately after his first sermon. His hometown audience in the synagogue at Nazareth clearly does not appreciate his message (see Luke 4:14-30)! Here in Capernaum, however, people are astonished by his teaching authority. How would you account for the difference?

Read Luke 4:33-37.

- (87) It is always embarrassing when someone creates a ruckus and interrupts a worship service. Earlier, in the wilderness, Jesus had rejected the devil's temptations (see Luke 4:1-13). But here they come again, in the form of "the spirit of an unclean demon." What form does evil take in your world?
- (88) There is no contest; Jesus has the upper hand from the very beginning. The demon recognizes Jesus' authority, knows he is "the Holy One of God," and is powerless to harm the possessed man. What does this suggest to us about Jesus' ability and purpose?
- (89) Today we might interpret the crazed man's problem as a form of mental illness. His cure or exorcism is in effect a liberation from evil. What does liberation from evil look like in today's world? Think in social, political and global terms.
- (90) Jesus needs no incantation or prayer; he saves the man with a single word. Our question is the same as the peoples: "What kind of word is this?"

Read Luke 4:38-41.

- (91) After the service, Jesus heals Simon Peter's mother-in-law. Note that he "scolds" her fever, and it leaves her, so she can put supper on the table. After Jesus heals them, people often go back to their regular lives. What do you think of that?
- (92) Healing touches, shouted exorcisms—all confirm Jesus' status as "the son of the god." Or is it "the Son of God"? Does it make a difference?

Read Luke 4:42-44.

- (93) Jesus refuses to stay in one place, where people can control him, and opts instead to preach the gospel of God's reign in other places. How do we try to "contain" Jesus and his Gospel? How do we help spread it around? Better yet, how does the Gospel of Jesus get spread around in our community? In our world?

HONORS FOR PHYSICIANS

People in the ancient Mediterranean world were properly grateful for the healing powers of their local physicians. The following three inscriptions inscribed in stone, all dating from around 200 BCE, give evidence of the honor in which they were held and, in some cases, the benefits they received from their fellow countrymen.

In the time of Eutychides, on 1 Alseios. Decree of the People of Aigella: WHEREAS Anaxippos, the son of Alexander and physician appointed by the Assembly, has conducted himself in praise worthy fashion for many years both in his profession and in his life and spared no effort as he brought numerous citizens safely through serious diseases, including terminal cases; therefore, in order that the People might continue to be known for expressing appropriate appreciation to those who choose to be their benefactors, and in order that physicians to come might show themselves all the more zealous in meeting the needs of the People, be it RESOLVED by the People of Aigella, to commend Anaxippos for the warm concern he shows. . . .

[Danker, Benefactor, no. 2]

WHEREAS Hippocrates, son of Thessalos and citizen of Kos, constantly renders all aid and assistance to the people as a whole and privately to citizens who request his service, be it resolved by the People to commend Hippocrates citizen of Kos, for his policy of goodwill to the people, and to crown him in the theater, at the Dionysia, with a golden crown in recognition of his virtue and goodwill; and that the managers of the musical make the proclamation of the reward. . . .

[Danker, Benefactor, no. 3]

. . . . a completely professional manner and has come to the aid of many who had fallen dangerously ill, and in accordance with his profession provides excellent treatment and accepts his assigned responsibility for the health of each one; therefore, so that all may know that the people are grateful to those who miss no opportunity to demonstrate goodwill toward them, be it RESOLVED to commend him and to award him a golden wreath for his virtue and for the goodwill that he shows toward the people. . . . [Danker, Benefactor, no. 4]

- Jesus was no physician, but he healed people who were seriously ill. Note the responses which were given to him and compare them to the responses to the physicians in the inscriptions.
- Also note the public and political nature of the physicians' practice. Was there a similar dimension to Jesus' healings?
- What are the political implications of health care in our day?

FOURTEENTH SESSION — LUKE 5:12-26
A LEPER & A PARAPLEGIC

Deliver us, Lord, from every evil, and grant us peace in our day. In your mercy keep us free from sin and protect us from all anxiety as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. [ELW #515]

Read Luke 5:12-16.

- (94) Leviticus 13:2-3, & 4-8 lists the symptoms of two kinds of leprosy, severe skin diseases which disfigured and eventually killed their victims. When they were recognized by a priest, lepers were separated from the community; they lived in isolation and were counted as deceased. They could not touch or be touched by anyone. Are people who live with HIV/AIDS our modern day equivalents to “lepers”?
- (95) The fact that Jesus actually *touches* the man may be as important as the fact that he *heals* him! Whom do you know who could use your healing touch or hug?
- (96) A priest’s verification of the healing would have allowed the leper to reenter society. What steps do we take to (re)admit outsiders into society, into our community?

Read Luke 5:17-20.

- (97) Note that teaching and healing repeatedly go together. Is this because people are ignorant and sick? Are we?
- (98) The friends of the paralyzed man let nothing stand in their way. To avoid the crowd, they climb the outside stairs onto the flat roof of the house, remove the tiles, and lower their friend’s stretcher. Jesus recognizes *their* faith and forgives *his* sins. What sense does that make? We expect a healing, but we get an absolution. Is there a connection?

Read Luke 5:21-26.

- (99) The religious leaders and theologians (that is, the “Pharisees” and the “scribes” or “legal scholars” in the text) raise a charge of blasphemy because only God can forgive sins. Is that true? If so, how can we ever be assured we are forgiven?
- (100) This is the first time the title “the Son of Man” (literally, “the son of the man”) appears in this gospel. How many ways, do you imagine, can this phrase be interpreted?
- (101) St. Luke wants us to understand that both healing and forgiveness come to us in the here and now through Jesus. How do such gifts come to us today? Directly, or indirectly? What would happen if our doctors offered both medical advice and spiritual direction?
- (102) The paralyzed or paraplegic man was helpless in his day. If stem cell research holds the potential to heal paralyzed people today, should government funds support the research?
- (103) Both the healed man and the bystanders give glory to God because of the strange things they experience. Have you ever experienced something like that?

RECOGNITION OF THE HEALINGS OF THE GOD ASCLEPIUS

In the Greco-Roman world there were numerous wonder-workers and deities whose specialty was miraculous healing; chief among them was the heroic physician Asclepius, who was worshiped throughout the Greco-Roman world, with major shrines in Epidaurus, Athens, Kos, Pergamum, Lebena, Rome and elsewhere.

Asclepius was among the most beloved of the Greco-Roman gods—people called him “the Savior”—because he blended deep wisdom with genuine philanthropy; he was especially known for his compassion toward common people and children. Inscriptions from the 4th century BCE to the 3rd century CE reveal that he was celebrated for giving relief from obstetrical difficulties, internal parasites and diseases, wounds, facial marks, paralysis, blindness, sores, muteness, headaches, and other maladies; some authors even claimed that he raised the dead. The following four inscriptions show why he was one of the most beloved deities in the Roman pantheon and why his cult was one of the last to be suppressed by the Christian church.

In those very days our God Asclepius revealed to a certain blind man named Gaius to come to the base of his statue and worship, then to go from the right to the left and to place his five fingers on the base and to lift up his hand and hold it to his eyes; and his sight was clear as the crowd stood by and rejoiced with him because life-giving power showed themselves in the presence of Augustus Antoninus [emperor 131-171 CE].

God revealed to Lucius, afflicted with pleurisy, and given up by everyone, to come and take ashes from the altar to the Three Gods and mix them up well with wine and to apply the mixture to the afflicted area. And he was saved and gave thanks publicly to God and the people rejoiced with him.*

To Julian, who was spitting blood and who was given up by everyone, God revealed that he should come and take from the altar to the Three Gods fine seeds and eat them with honey for three days. And he was healed and came to give thanks publicly before the people.*

To Valerius Aper, a blind soldier, God revealed that he should go and take the blood from a white rooster and mix it with honey and compound a poultice and rub it in his eyes for three days. And he regained his sight and went and gave thanks publicly to God.

* probably Zeus, Poseidon and Hades
[Danker, *Benefactor*, no. 28]

- Do you notice any similarities between Jesus’ healings and those of Asclepius?
- Also, do you notice any similarities in the responses to their healings?
- How might Greco-Roman readers of Luke’s gospel have interpreted the stories of Jesus’ miraculous healings?

FIFTEENTH SESSION — LUKE 7:1-17
AN OFFICER'S BOY & A WIDOW'S SON

Merciful Lord God, we do not presume to come before you trusting in our own righteousness, but in your great and abundant mercies. Revive our faith, we pray; heal our bodies, and mend our communities, that we may evermore dwell in your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. [ELW #112]

- (104) After the “Sermon on the Plain” (see Luke 6:20-49; item #32), Luke shares a carefully crafted story in which Jesus heals a centurion’s dying slave. Note the symmetry:
- A¹ - The officer sends a delegation to ask Jesus for help.
 - B¹ - They approach Jesus and praise the centurion.
 - C¹ - Jesus follows them.
 - A² - The officer sends a second delegation.
 - B² - They deliver his speech (in the first person singular!).
 - C² - Jesus addresses the crowd and affirms the officer’s faith.

Also note that Jesus and the officer never meet face-to-face! Does this surprise you?

Read Luke 7:1-6a.

- (105) All we know about the slave is that he is near death and that he is “valuable” (and not just financially) to his master—factors which impel his owner to take the extraordinary step of asking a Jewish teacher to save his boy. What would it take for you to do something extraordinary to help a loved one? To help a stranger? Or an undocumented immigrant?

Read Luke 7:6b-10.

- (106) First Jewish elders and now the officer’s friends arrive. Obviously he respects the custom that Jews do not enter the houses of Gentiles. He also acknowledges that the authority of Jesus’ word is as effective as his own. Can you think of other examples which illustrate the power of Jesus’ spoken word?
- (107) The healing is mentioned almost as an afterthought. Here the important thing is the magnitude of the officer’s faith. Suppose Jesus were to say, “Not even in America. . . .” Or, “Not even among Lutherans. . . .” Or, “Not even in the church have I found such great faith.” How would you react to that?

Read Luke 7:11-17.

- (108) In Jesus’ day, a woman who had no husband or son to safeguard her interests was nearly without resources, and could be reduced to begging, or worse. Identify some of the people in our society who have been reduced to similar straits.
- (109) The emphasis here is not on the faith of the woman (or her son, obviously), but on the compassion of Jesus. He is moved to do the unthinkable. He forcibly interrupts a funeral cortege! Note the response of the mourners: fear, doxology, “a great prophet,” “God has paid a visit!” To what, do you think, were they reacting? The rousing of the dead boy? Or something more?

A BRIDE WHO DIED IS REVIVED

Among the miraculous cures performed by Apollonius (see Section 5) is this resuscitation of a bride who died on her wedding day.

[Book 4.45.1-2] *Apollonius performed another miracle. There was a girl who appeared to have died just at the time of her wedding. The betrothed followed the bier, with all the lamentations of an unconsummated marriage, and Rome mourned with him since the girl belonged to a consular family.*

Meeting with this scene of sorrow, Apollonius said, "Put the bier down, for I will end your crying over the girl." At the same time he asked her name, which made most people think he was going to declaim a speech of the kind delivered at funerals to raise lamentation. But Apollonius, after merely touching her and saying something secretly, woke the bride from her apparent death. The girl spoke, and went back to her father's house like Alcestis revived by Heracles.

Her kinsmen wanted to give Apollonius a hundred and fifty thousand drachmas, but he said to give it as an extra dowry for the girl. He may have seen a spark of life in her which the doctors had not noticed, since apparently the sky was drizzling and steam was coming from her face, or he may have revived and restored her life when it was extinguished, but the explanation of this has proved unfathomable, not just to me but to the bystanders.

[LCL, vol. 16]

- Does it surprise you that resurrection stories were told in the Mediterranean world in addition to those told about Jesus?
- Philostratus (the author of the story) expresses some doubt about whether this was actually a miracle or not. Would Luke's readers have wondered the same thing? Do you?
- Is there a moral to Philostratus's story? To Luke's?

SIXTEENTH SESSION — LUKE 8:22-39
A STORM AT SEA & A LUNATIC IN A GRAVEYARD

O Lord God, we bring before you the cries of a sorrowing world. In your mercy set us free from the chains that bind us, and defend us from everything that is evil, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

[ELW #121]

Read Luke 8:22-25.

- (110) This is a fast-action episode—they embark, Jesus falls asleep, a storm blows up, the boat swamps, the men despair, Jesus scolds the elements, the storm calms down. Sometimes life is like that, isn't it? A crisis can arise without warning, and then be resolved just as quickly. What is the point of asking for faith in such a situation?

Read Luke 9:26-33.

- (111) In Luke's gospel, this is Jesus' first and last foray into foreign territory. The man who confronts him has been deprived by a hoard of demons of two key characteristics of a civilized human being, namely, proper clothing and a proper domicile. Make a few connections with our lives, our society, today.
- (112) A "legion" is a technical military term for unit of 5,400-6,000 soldiers (plus an equal number of auxiliary troops, i.e. cavalry, local militia, etc.) in the Roman army. It may be that Jesus' earliest followers retold this story as a thinly-disguised wish that the imperial occupation forces would be run off and destroyed. What do you think? Do you think most Iranians or Iraqis or Afghans in recent years thought that way about the "occupation forces" on their soil?
- (113) The demons know Jesus' name and title. For ancient exorcists, it was also crucial for them to know the name of the spirit to be expelled. Jesus demands and gets it, and then "bargains" with the enemy! Unclean spirits belong in unclean animals, and both are then drowned. Do you think that was fair for the owners of the pigs?

Read Luke 9:34-39.

- (114) So the swineherds and their fellow-citizens are properly afraid, and they ask Jesus to vacate their territory. Sometimes it seems as though people would prefer to keep their affliction rather than be healed. Can you give any examples? Is that true of you?
- (115) Note the irony: The demons get what they beg for, and are destroyed! The possessed man does *not* get what he begs for, and turns into a missionary! What happens when you do not get what you pray for?
- (116) A main point of this story is not just that Jesus is powerful enough to defeat the demonic forces, but—more importantly—that he restores a deranged and dangerous man to sanity and to his rightful place in the community. This raises the question of how we today treat people who live with mental illnesses. What is your opinion?

AN HEROIC ESCAPE FROM THE SEA

Travel by sea has always been a dangerous undertaking, especially in ancient times when sailing ships were largely at the mercy of the wind. Homer's *Odyssey*, likely written before 700 BCE, is the classic tale of adventures on the sea, and was widely read throughout the Greco-Roman world for centuries. According to the story, it took the Greek hero Odysseus ten years to return to his home in Ithica after the ten year Trojan War (which is recounted in Homer's *Iliad*). At one point he is befriended by the beautiful goddess Calypso, who helps him build a raft to sail home, but Poseidon, god of the sea, is jealous and vows to destroy Odysseus.

[Book 5, lines 291-312] *[Poseidon] gathered the clouds, and seizing his trident in his hands troubled the sea, and roused all blasts of all manner of winds, and hid with clouds land and sea alike; and night rushed down from heaven. Together the East Wind and the South Wind dashed, and the fierce-blowing West Wind and the North Wind, born in the bright heaven, rolling before him a mighty wave.*

Then were the knees of Odysseus loosened and his heart melted, and deeply moved he spoke to his own mighty spirit: "Ah me, wretched that I am! What is to befall me at the last? I fear me that verily all that the goddess said was true, when she declared that on the sea, before ever I came to my native land, I should fill up my measure of woes; and lo, all this now is being brought to pass. In such wise does Zeus overcast the broad heaven with clouds, and has stirred up the sea, and the blasts of all manner of winds sweep upon me; now is my utter destruction sure.

"Thrice blessed those Danaans, aye, four times blessed, who of old perished in the wide land of Troy, doing the pleasure of the sons of Atreus. Even so would that I had died and met my fate on that day when the throngs of the Trojans hurled upon me bronze-tipped spears, fighting around the body of the dead son of Peleus. Then should I have got funeral rites, and the Achaeans would have spread my fame, but now by a miserable death was it appointed me to be cut off."

[ll. 313-332] *Even as thus he spoke the great wave smote him from on high, rushing upon him with terrible might, and around it whirled his raft. Far from the raft he fell, and let fall the steering-oar from his hand; but his mast was broken in the midst by the fierce blast of tumultuous winds that came upon it, and far in the sea sail and yardarm fell. As for him, long time did the wave hold him in the depths, nor could he rise at once from beneath the onrush of the mighty wave, for the garments which beautiful Calypso had given him weighed him down.*

At length, however, he came up, and spat forth from his mouth the bitter brine which flowed in streams from his head. Yet even so he did not forget his raft, in evil case though he was, but sprang after it amid the waves, and laid hold of it, and sat down in the midst of it, seeking to escape the doom of death; and a great wave ever bore him this way and that along its course. As when in autumn the North Wind bears the thistle-tufts over the plain, and close they cling to one another, so did the winds bear the raft this way and that over the sea. Now the South Wind would fling it to the North Wind to be driven on, and now again the East Wind would yield it to the West Wind to drive.

[LCL, vol. 170]

- How might Greco-Roman auditors, familiar with the stories of storms at sea, have heard Luke's story of the squall which threatened to swamp the boat with Jesus and the disciples?
- Compare the reactions of Odysseus and Jesus as their ships are threatened.
- Odysseus was finally rescued when another sympathetic goddess, "Ino of the fair ankles," gave him a magical veil which enabled him to swim to Phoenicia. Compare this with the way in which the boat in Luke's story was saved.
- How might Luke's auditors have evaluated Jesus?

SEVENTEENTH SESSION — LUKE 8:40-56
A PRESIDENT'S DAUGHTER & A BLEEDING WOMAN

Gracious God, in times of sorrow and depression, when hope itself seems lost, help us to remember the transforming power of your steadfast love and to give thanks for that new life we cannot now imagine; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. [ELW #524]

- (117) Notice the sophisticated literary technique in this sequence, where one incident is sandwiched within another. Both are about females, who are in hopeless situations. The twelve-year-old girl is at the beginning of her child-bearing years; the woman with the 12-year-long gynecological disorder is at the end. A healing touch is part of each case: Jesus' hem is grabbed by an unclean woman, and he grabs the hand of the girl's unclean corpse. Do such literary details affect your appreciation of this passage?

Read Luke 8:40-42.

- (118) List three things we know about this man, who comes in person to beg for Jesus' help.

Name: _____ Position: _____ Family: _____

- (119) What makes his predicament so poignant? Have you ever felt that way?

Skip the next few verses and read Luke 8:49-56.

- (120) Then someone else arrives with an abrupt announcement: "Your daughter's dead, so don't bother." Have you ever been treated that way? What did it feel like?
- (121) Jesus' response is equally brusque: "Don't fear; just trust; she'll be saved." Reflect on how each of those verbs would sound if spoken to you in a difficult situation.
- (122) So Jesus "awakens" the girl and she "arises." (Elsewhere, these are the two chief New Testament terms for the resurrection.) Do you think the girl was actually dead, or was she merely comatose, as Jesus said?

Now go back and read Luke 8:43-48.

- (123) The woman's menstrual spotting has lasted for over a decade, which means she is not supposed to appear in public. Furthermore, useless medical expenses have bankrupted her. Yet she dares to squeeze through a crowd and touch Jesus' fringes. What chutzpa! Do you know any women as courageous as that? Do you wish you did?
- (124) Does this incident suggest anything about our system of health insurance and delivery of medical benefits in the United States today? What about "Obamacare"?
- (125) "Your *faith* has saved you," says Jesus. "Go in *peace*." Trust, Salvation, Shalom—these blessings are ours in every age. How do you experience them in your family? Do you experience them in our society?

STOIC CONSOLATION AT THE DEATH OF A CHILD

Lucius Annaeus Seneca (c. 4 BCE-65 CE), known simply as “Seneca the Younger,” was a contemporary of Jesus and Paul, although of course they never met. He was born in Spain and brought to Rome as a child. As a renowned Stoic philosopher, he became an advisor to emperors Caligula (who came close to having him executed), Claudius (who had him exiled), and Nero (who eventually ordered him to commit suicide). Among his many writings are a series of so-called *Moral Epistles* which address specific real-life issues from the perspective of Stoic philosophy. Here are the opening paragraphs of his letter “On Consolation to the Bereaved.”

[par. 1] *I enclose a copy of the letter which I wrote to Marullus at the time when he had lost his little son and was reported to be rather womanish in his grief—a letter in which I have not observed the usual form of condolence: for I did not believe that he should be handled gently, since in my opinion he deserved criticism rather than consolation.*

When a man is stricken and is finding it most difficult to endure a grievous wound, one must humor him for a while; let him satisfy his grief or at any rate work off the first shock; but those who have assumed an indulgence in grief should be rebuked forthwith, and should learn that there are certain follies even in tears.

[What follows is the opening of Seneca’s letter to Marullus.]

[par. 2-5] *“Is it solace that you look for? Let me give you a scolding instead! You are like a woman in the way you take your son’s death; what would you do if you had lost an intimate friend? A son, a little child of unknown promise, is dead; a fragment of time has been lost.*

“We hunt out excuses for grief; we would even utter unfair complaints about Fortune, as if Fortune would never give us just reason for complaining!

“But I had really thought that you possess spirit enough to deal with concrete troubles, to say nothing of the shadowy troubles of which men make moan through force of habit. Had you lost a friend (which is the greatest blow of all), you would have had to endeavor rather to rejoice because you had possessed him than to mourn because you had lost him.

“But many men fail to count up how manifold their gains have been, how great their rejoicings. Grief like yours has this among other evils: it is not only useless, but thankless.” [LCL, no. 99, vol. 076]

- Compare Seneca’s response to the death of Marullus’ son with Jesus’ response to the death of Jairus’ daughter.
- If someone close to you dies, is it better to “let it all out” emotionally, or to “keep it all in”?
- Second century Christians held a high opinion of Seneca. Some even speculated that he might have been converted by St. Paul and that his death (with his wrists slit in a warm bath) was a kind of baptismal experience. Do you think his Stoic teachings are compatible with Christian doctrine?

EIGHTEENTH SESSION — LUKE 9:10-17

THOUSANDS OF HUNGRY PEOPLE

Merciful Creator, your hand is open wide to satisfy the needs of every living creature. Make us always thankful for your loving providence; and grant that we, remembering the account that we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of your good gifts, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

[ELW #240]

Read Luke 9:1-6.

- (126) When his work in Galilee is nearly done (at Luke 9:50), Jesus sends the Twelve on a mission throughout the region to replicate his work of preaching, healing and expelling demons. They go without provisions, and they do not force themselves on any who do not want them. Does this suggest anything about our work today?

Read Luke 9:10-11.

- (127) When they return, Jesus takes them on a retreat. But the crowds follow and find them, so he welcomes them with more conversation about God's reign. When has your quiet time been interrupted by more important business?

Read Luke 9:12-17.

- (128) When supper time comes, his men want to dismiss the people. Instead, Jesus tells them to serve dinner, but they object that they have only a handful of fish sandwiches. Which is hardly enough for thousands. Some modern-day politicians insist that we have a scarcity of resources. Was that true then? Is it true now?
- (129) Jesus' actions—blessing God, breaking bread, distributing food *via* his disciples—remind us of his actions at the Last Supper (see Luke 19:14-23; Session 21). Or does the Lord's Supper remind us of this miraculous gift?
- (130) Five thousand people eat their fill, and twelve hampers full of leftovers are collected. Obviously there is more than enough. Some modern-day politicians believe we have an abundance of resources. Was that true then? Is it true now?
- (131) In ancient times, Moses provided manna (see Exodus 16:1-36) to the starving Israelites in the wilderness. The prophets Elijah and Elisha (see 1 Kings 17:8-16 & 2 Kings 4:42-44) provided food to their starving hosts. Here Jesus stands in that tradition, but he does an even better job of nourishing hungry people. Now it is our turn. What factors prevent us from eliminating hunger in our day?
- (132) *Bread for the World* is a Christian organization which lobbies the U. S. congress to enact legislation which will help distribute food to famine-plagued countries. Do you think this is a good strategy? If so, how can you participate in the effort?

THE ARETALOGY OF AN EMPEROR

Near the end of his life emperor Caesar Augustus (see Section 2) commissioned a monument now known as the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* (literally, “The Deeds of the Divine Augustus”). It gives a first-person account of his life and accomplishments in 35 paragraphs in four sections—his political career, public benefactions, military accomplishments, and political statement—plus an introduction and a posthumous addendum. The original bronze pillars which were to be placed before his tomb have been lost, but their contents were inscribed on numerous sites around the Mediterranean world. The following samples feature Augustus’ honorary titles and some of the blessings he brought to the Roman people.

[chap. 1, lines 1-2, 7-9] *At the age of nineteen, I raised an army on my own initiative and at my own expense, and I liberated the Republic when it was oppressed by a tyrannical faction. . . . The people, in the same year that both consuls died in war [i.e. 43 BCE], bestowed on me the consulship and chose me as one of the triumvirs to bring stability to the Republic.*

[3, 13-15] *Frequent wars, both civil and foreign, on land and sea, I carried on throughout the world. In victory I spared all citizens who begged for mercy. Foreign nations, where it was safe to grant clemency I preferred to spare rather than to annihilate.*

[5, 33-35] ***I did not decline administration of the grain supply during a severe food shortage, and within a few days, through my careful supervision I liberated our people from fear and threatening peril. I did, however, decline the consulship, which was offered me annually and in perpetuity.***

[9, 15-20] *The Senate decreed that the consuls and priests were to offer up vows in behalf of my health every four years. In keeping with these vows they held games frequently during my lifetime—with the four most honorable colleges of priests, and occasionally the consuls, accepting responsibility. Moreover, citizens everywhere, privately as individuals and collectively as municipalities, sacrificed unremittingly at all the shrines on behalf of my health.*

[12, 37-41] *When . . . I returned to Rome after my successful resolution of affairs in the provinces of Spain and Gaul, the Senate decreed that an Altar to Pax Auagusta was to be consecrated in the Campus Martius in commemoration of my return and it ordered that the magistrates, priests, and Vestal Virgins should celebrate it with an annual sacrifice.*

[18, 40-43] *From the year when Gnaeus and Publius Lentulus were consuls, whenever the provinces were unable to pay their full tribute, **I brought relief once to 100,000 people and on occasion to many more through grants of grain from my own land, and money from my own estate.***

[26, 9-12] *I extended the frontiers of all Rome’s provinces that were bounded by peoples who were not under our imperial sway. In all the area washed by the Ocean, from Gades to the mouth of the Elbe River, I restored peace to the provinces of Gaul and Spain, and likewise to Germany.*

[34, 13-21] *In my sixth and seventh consulships, after I had extinguished the Civil War and by general consent was granted supreme command of the Empire, I relinquished my control and transferred the Republic to the free judgment of the Senate and the Roman People. For this service of mine, and by decree of the Senate, I received the title Augustus, and the doorposts of my house were publicly decked with laurel.*

The civic crown was fixed above my entrance, and a golden shield was set up in the Julian Senate-House. The Roman People gave it to me, with this inscription: “A man of arête and forbearance, of upright and reverent character.” From that moment I enjoyed prestige above all others, but of actual power I possessed no more than my associates in various offices.

[Danker, *Benefactor*, no. 43]

- Note the titles given to Jesus in Luke’s gospel. How do they compare with Augustus’ honors?
- Augustus boasted of providing food for hungry people. Would Greco-Roman readers have thought of Jesus in similar terms as a benefactor of the people?

NINETEENTH SESSION — LUKE 9:28-43
A TRANSFORMATION & AN EPILEPTIC BOY

Holy God, mighty and immortal, you are beyond our knowing, yet we see your glory in the face of Jesus Christ. Transform us into the likeness of your Son, who renewed our humanity so that we may share in his divinity, now and forever. Amen. [ELW #50]

- (133) At the feeding of the 5000, Jesus followed the tradition of people like Moses and Elijah who provided miraculous food for God’s people (see Exodus 16:1-36 and 1 Kings 17:8-16). Here those two figures from the past join Jesus in a scene of glory reminiscent of Moses’ glorification on Mount Sinai (see Exodus 34:29-35) and Elijah’s ascent into heaven in a fiery chariot (see 2 Kings 2:9-12). Why do you suppose Luke tells this story, at this point in the narrative?

Read Luke 9:28-32.

- (134) Luke emphasizes that the Transfiguration takes place during a time of intentional prayer. Have you ever had a life-changing experience while you were praying?
- (135) Moses and Elijah, two Old Testament figures who did not “die” in the usual sense, converse with Jesus about his own “exodus” or “departure,” that is, his impending death. What could be the significance of this?

Read Luke 9:33-36.

- (136) Like the three men, our eyes can be sleepy and our reactions misinformed. Have you ever witnessed something so exciting and strange that you didn’t know what to say?
- (137) The voice from the sky at Jesus’ baptism (see Luke 3:21-22) confirmed his divine relationship as God’s “beloved” Son. Here the voice from the cloud emphasizes Jesus’ mission as God’s “chosen” Son. Peter, John and James are told to “listen to him.” What exactly are they—and we—supposed to listen to?

Read Luke 9:37-43a.

- (138) Next day, back down the mountain, Jesus is accosted by another parent whose only child is in a desperate situation. The description of the boy’s affliction (which the ancients referred to as “the sacred disease”) sounds like a *grand mal* epileptic seizure, but Luke calls it a demon or unclean spirit. What do you think?
- (139) Surprisingly—and uncharacteristically—Jesus reacts with an angry rant against the disciples and/or the crowd and accuses them of being a “faithless and perverse generation.” What do you suppose he was referring to? Is our generation as bad as that? Why?
- (140) But in the end the healed boy is restored to his father. Even today tension and even anger can result in healing and restoration. Can you think of any examples? Think personally, and socially, and nationally.

RELEASE FROM AN EPILEPTIC SEIZURE

Lucian of Samosata (c. 125 - post-180 CE), a native of the Roman province of Syria, traveled through Ionia (southern Turkey), Greece, Italy, and as far as Gaul (present-day France) entertaining people with his satirical verses and stories. His surviving works, over eighty in number, include speeches, essays, epigrams, dialogues and banquet conversations, most of them in a witty and sarcastic style.

His comic dialogue *The Lover of Lies* makes fun of the naïve pretensions and beliefs of his day. What follows is a conversation with Ion, who believes in miraculous exorcisms and cures of what we today would call epileptic seizures.

[par. 16] *"You act ridiculously," said Ion, "to doubt everything. For my part I should like to ask you what you say to those who free possessed men from their terrors by exorcising the spirits so manifestly. I need not discuss this: everyone knows about the Syrian from Palestine, the one adept in it, how many he takes in hand who fall down in the light of the moon and roll their eyes and fill their mouths with foam; nevertheless, he restores them to health and sends them away normal in mind, delivering them from their straits for a large fee.*

"When he stands beside them as they lie there and asks: 'Whence came you into his body?' the patient himself is silent, but the spirit answers in Greek or in the language of whatever foreign country he comes from, telling how and whence he entered into the man; whereupon, by adjuring the spirit and if he does not obey, threatening him, he drives him out. Indeed, I actually saw one coming out, black and smoky in color."

"It is nothing much," I remarked, "for you, Ion, to see that kind of sight . . . [which seems] plain to you, [but is just] a hazy object of vision to the rest of us, whose eyes are weak." [LCL, vol. 130]

- The description of the affliction sounds like the symptoms of epilepsy, but the ancients called it the "moon disease" and attributed it to demonic possession. Does it make a difference? For Lucian? For Luke? For Jesus? For us?
- Notice that Ion's "Syrian from Palestine" performs his deliverance "for a large fee." Compare this with Luke's account of Jesus' healing.
- Lucian is obviously skeptical about such healings. Would Greco-Roman auditors of Luke's gospel have been skeptical about Jesus' healings? Are you? Why, or why not?

ENDINGS

The final week of Jesus' life, observed in the church as "Holy Week," is bracketed by his entrance into Jerusalem on what we today call "Palm Sunday" and his resurrection from the grave on "Easter Sunday."

His arrest and execution take place near the end that week, on "Maundy Thursday" and "Good Friday." The first part of the week is primarily taken up with his controversies and teachings in and around the temple.

Because our sessions will deal mostly with key events at the beginning and end of the week, it would be good to read the entire section, Luke 18: 31-24:53, to appreciate the full sweep of the story.

Unlike some of the previous sections, the events here flow smoothly one after another in a unified narrative.

These chapters, of course, center on the story of Jesus' death, a state-sponsored execution by crucifixion. The practice of executing criminals by hanging them on a pole while still alive began with the Phoenicians and the Persians, who taught it to the Greeks and Romans.

This particularly nasty and obscene way of killing someone—to tie or nail them naked to a pole and crossbeam, and let them hang there exposed to public ridicule until they go mad and finally die—was reserved for slaves and other non-citizens who were guilty of insurrection and other crimes against the state.

The Romans used crucifixion—for thousands in Palestine alone—as a tactic to intimidate subject peoples and ensure their compliance. The practice was finally abolished by Emperor Constantine in the 4th century CE.

Historical studies confirm that the hands or wrists of a condemned person were tied or nailed to a crossbeam (known as a *patibulum*), which the victim had likely carried from the judgment place to the site of the execution.

There the crossbeam was lifted by soldiers using ladders or poles with a Y-shaped fork at the end

(called *forcillae*) and attached to the top of an upright pole which had been previously placed in the ground. The victim's feet could be nailed to the upright beam or left hanging loose, in either case about a foot or two off the ground.

Sometimes a placard (or *titulus*) stating the nature of the crime could be hung around the victim's neck or affixed to the top of the cross. Also, a small piece of wood (or *sedicula*) could be nailed underneath the buttocks to enable the victim to push upward and breathe more easily, and therefore live and suffer a little longer.

Otherwise death might come too quickly. Victims of crucifixion could survive in agony for days before succumbing to asphyxiation. As their lungs filled with fluid they could breathe in oxygen but eventually became incapable of expelling carbon dioxide.

The corpses of those who died might be eaten by carrion birds and feral animals if left on their crosses to decompose, or they might be removed and thrown into a common burial pit, or in some cases even claimed by relatives for a normal burial.

OUTRAGE OVER THE CRUCIFIXION OF A ROMAN CITIZEN

In 70 BCE the Roman senator and orator Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BCE) took the role of a prosecutor to accuse Gaius Verres, a former governor of Sicily, of extortion and embezzlement and other crimes against the state. His worst offense, according to Cicero's *Against Verres: Part II*, was having crucified Publius Gavius, who was a free Roman citizen!

[par. 165] *Now when I have given your friends and supporters ample proof of all these facts that I undertake to prove, I intend to lay hold of the very point which you yourself concede me, and proclaim myself content with that. What did you say yourself the other day, when you lept up terrified by the shouts and angry gestures of your countrymen—what did you tell us plainly then? That the man [whom you crucified] kept calling out that he was a Roman citizen simply in order to delay his execution, but was in fact a mere spy.*

Very well then, my witnesses are telling the truth. It is precisely this that we are told by Gaius Numitorius, by those two well-known gentlemen Marcus and Publius Cottius who come from the Tauromenium district, by Quintus Lucceius who has been an important banker in Regium, and by all the rest. For until now the witnesses I have called have been chosen not from among those who were to state that they knew Gavius personally, but from those who were to state that they saw him when he was being dragged off to be crucified in spite of his proclaiming himself a Roman citizen.

This is exactly what you, Verres, say, this is what you admit, that he kept proclaiming himself a Roman citizen, that this mention of his citizenship had not even so much effect upon you as to produce a little hesitation, or to delay, even for a little, the infliction of that cruel and disgusting penalty.

[par. 169] *But I need say no more about Gavius. It was not Gavius against whom your hate was then displayed: you declared war upon the whole principle of the rights of the Roman citizen body. You were the enemy, I say again, not of that individual man, but of the common liberties of us all.*

What else was the meaning of your order to the Messanians, who had followed their regular custom by setting up the cross on the Pompeian Road behind the town, to set it up [instead] in the part of the town that looks over the Straits [from Sicily to Italy]?

And why did you add words that you cannot possibly deny having used, words that you said openly in the hearing of all—that you purposely chose this spot to give this man, since he claimed to be a Roman citizen, a view of Italy and a prospect of his home country as he hung on his cross? That is the only cross, gentlemen [of the jury], ever set up in this spot in all Messana's history; and you now see why.

This place with its view of Italy was deliberately picked out by Verres, that his victim as he died in pain and agony, might feel how yonder narrow channel marked the frontier between the land of slavery and the land of freedom, and that Italy might see her son, as he hung there, suffer the worst extreme of the tortures inflicted upon slaves.

To bind a Roman citizen is a crime, to flog him is an abomination, to slay him is almost an act of murder; to crucify him is—what? There is no fitting word that can possibly describe so horrible a deed.

[LCL, vol. 293]

- Note that Cicero does not describe the pain of crucifixion, but the outrageous humiliation of inflicting this sort of punishment reserved for slaves upon a free Roman citizen.
- What does his death by crucifixion tell you about Jesus' social standing?
- Why would Jesus' earliest followers continue to remain loyal to this "non-person"?

TWENTIETH SESSION — LUKE 19:29-47
A CHALLENGING ENTRANCE

Lord Jesus, you have called us to follow you. Grant that our love may not grow cold in your service, and that we may not fail or deny you in the time of trial, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. [ELW #72]

Read Luke 19:29-40.

- (141) On certain festivals such as Passover, when Jerusalem would be filled with thousands of patriotic pilgrims, the Roman governor would leave his capital at Caesarea on the Sea and parade into the city from the west, on a war horse with a military escort. Luke ignores this; instead we observe a less auspicious entrance—one man on a donkey coming in from the east. Would Luke’s original readers have noticed the contrast? Did you? Does it make a difference?
- (142) When the owner of the colt challenges the pair of disciples who commandeer it, they reply, “The Lord needs it.” Does this mean “the Lord God” or “the Lord Jesus”? In either case, why would the owner give up his property on such a flimsy pretext?
- (143) So Jesus sits on a colt which has never been broken and rides into town! Is this supposed to be a miracle? Or is something else going on here?
- (144) Notice how the crowd’s acclamation of **Psalm 118:26** adds the title “king,” and repeats the shout of the heavenly armies at Jesus’ birth (see Luke 2:14, item #13). From Luke’s perspective, what does this tell us about Jesus?

Read Luke 19:41-44.

- (145) Only Luke records Jesus’ lamentation over the city. He predicts a military siege will flatten it because its citizens did not (do not? will not?) recognize what makes for peace or the time of God’s visitation. No doubt Luke has in mind the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman armies in 70 CE. Can this implied warning apply to us and to our cities? If so, in what way?

Read Luke 19:45-48 (and 21:37-38).

- (146) Compared with the other gospels, Luke’s version of the temple incident is quite brief. Although pilgrims and others no doubt prayed in the temple, its chief purpose was to offer sacrifices. Note how Jesus’ saying alters the words of **Isaiah 56:7** and **Jeremiah 7:11**. Does this have any implications for how we conduct business in our church buildings?
- (147) Note the contrast between the reactions to Jesus’ teachings by the religious leaders, on the one hand, and by the common people, on the other. We will not be studying his teachings (Luke 20:1-21:38) in these exercises. But it wouldn’t hurt to read them, would it?

DEATH PENALTY FOR SACRILEGE

Every Greco-Roman city had temples; they were integral to the city's welfare and political status. The temple in Jerusalem (see Session Three) was no less important to Jewish religious and political life; in fact, both were intertwined. To desecrate any national shrine or disrespect its priestly overseers was a serious offense.

The following inscription comes from the 3rd century BCE, and most likely was from the temple of Artemis in Ephesus. It gives the verdict which was directed against forty officials at Sardis who insulted the envoys from Ephesus when they arrived at Sardis to celebrate a festival for Artemis.

The advocates in behalf of the goddess brought in a sentence of death, as defined in this public announcement of the verdict. For our city sent envoys to Sardis to celebrate the "Investiture of Artemis" in accordance with ancestral custom, and when the priests and the envoys arrived at Sardis and at the temple of Artemis, which was founded by Ephesians, the accused violated the sanctity of the ceremonies and insulted the envoys. The verdict was death. And sentence was pronounced upon the following:

[The list of the forty people who were indicted is omitted here; Danker, *Benefactor*, no. 46]

- How would Greco-Roman readers have evaluated Jesus' disruption of the temple?
- Some refer to Jesus' action as a "cleansing" of the temple. Others call it a "desecration" of the temple. What would you call it?
- Could this be "the straw which broke the camel's back"? That is, the final insult which drove the authorities to eliminate Jesus?

TWENTY-FIRST SESSION — LUKE 22:7-38
A FINAL MEAL

Merciful God, we do not presume to come to your table trusting in our own righteousness, but in your abundant mercy. Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat and drink the body and blood of your dear Son, Jesus Christ, that we may live in him and he in us, now and forever. Amen. [ELW #255]

Read Luke 22:7-13.

- (148) Once again Jesus sends a pair of envois (see item #142) on an important mission. This time they are named: Peter and John, who have been together before (see Luke 8:51 & 9:28) and will work as a team later on (see Acts 3:1-2 & 8:14). They are to find a man carrying water—normally a woman’s job—to a homeowner who has an upstairs pavilion ready and waiting. Does this suggest that Jesus had miraculous foreknowledge? Or that he had made secret plans in advance? Or what?
- (149) Lambs were slaughtered (not “sacrificed”) at midday on the 14th of Nissan (March-April) in the forecourt of the temple, and then roasted and eaten within the city walls during a “Passover” meal which began after sundown and continued into the night. This commemorated the meal which the ancient Israelites ate before they were freed from slavery in Egypt at the time of the Exodus. The matzo or bread baked without yeast (considered a ritually unclean product) was eaten during the following week-long festival of “Unleavened Bread,” Nisan 15-21. The absence of yeast signified that the Jews were a holy people, separated out from the other nations. Liberation, separation—do other themes color the story of Jesus and the twelve? Are there any political implications here?

Read Luke 22:14-23.

- (150) Unlike other accounts of Jesus’ “Last Supper,” Luke’s version begins with a cup of wine. Jesus shares his personal cup with his companions, who are called “apostles,” not “disciples.” Which of his comments about not eating or drinking again until the Kingdom of God arrives is most troubling for you? Most encouraging?
- (151) Then comes the breaking of a loaf, which normally marks the beginning of a meal, followed by a final cup after supper is concluded. Note the phrases “my body,” “given for you,” “in my memory,” “poured out for you,” a “new covenant,” and “my blood.” What would these have meant for his dinner guests? For Luke’s Greco-Roman auditors? For us?
- (152) Note that Judas was apparently present throughout the meal! Does this suggest anything about our own observances of the “Lord’s Supper” today?

Read Luke 22:24-34.

- (153) Jesus says his people are not the kind who try to be greater than others—or greater than each other—but will practice a style of mutual service. Is this contradicted by his promise of kingdom banquets and judging thrones?
- (154) And are Jesus’ words to Simon, aka Peter, encouraging, or threatening? Isn’t it ironic that the one who will repudiate Jesus is also the one who will eventually encourage his colleagues?

Read Luke 22:35-38.

- (155) Two swords are enough. Enough for what? Self-defense? Political insurrection?

MEMORIAL BANQUETS AT A ROYAL BURIAL SHRINE

Memorial meals at the burial site of a person who had died were a common and widespread practice in the ancient world. This popular religious practice was often thought of as a way of eating with the dead and served to strengthen the legacy and fellowship of the family and friends of the deceased.

Around 50 BCE King Antiochos I of Kommagene in the northern part of Syria built an impressive mausoleum for himself, complete with statues of gods and heroes, as well as instructions for banquets to be celebrated in his memory in perpetuity. The instructions were inscribed on the base of the shrine.

[lines 1-24] *King Antiochos the Great—God the Just, Epiphanes, Friend of the Romans and Greeks, son of King Mithradates Kallinikos and of Queen Laodike Goddess Philadelphos, daughter of King Antiochos Epiphanes Philometor Kallinikos—has recorded with inviolable letters for all time to come his own gracious deeds.*

I considered piety not only the most secure possession but also the most pleasurable enjoyment for human beings, and the same judgment I held to be the cause of my prosperous power and of its most blessed use; and for my entire life I appeared to all as one who considered reverence the most faithful guardian of my reign and an inimitable source of delight; in consequence of which I was able to survive hazards and achieved remarkable mastery of hopeless situations and in the fullness of my many years found blessedness.

[ll. 124-162] *The priest who is appointed by me to serve these Gods and Heroes, whose statues I have set up around the ridges of the Tauros, where my body has its consecrated place, and whosoever shall in later time assume the post of priest, let him, in liberation from all other duties or obligations, and without evasion, attend to his responsibilities at this sacred burial place and give thought to his service and the appropriate adornment of these sacred images.*

And on my birthday and on those of the Gods, the priest is to . . . celebrate the monthly and annual feasts that I have ordained for all time to come, and the priest is to crown all the guests with the golden crowns that I have consecrated for pious honoring of the Divinities; and when he takes from the villages the produce that in the sacred grace of my Heroic Nature have sanctified, he shall sprinkle frankincense and spices generously on these altars and perform sumptuous sacrifices to the Gods and to our own honor by heaping the sacred tables with an appropriate feast and by pouring full the vintage bowls with liberal supply of mixed wine

And he shall welcome with due consideration all the populace, natives and strangers who happen to be present, and he shall grant the gathering crowds enjoyable participation in the feast, and he shall select . . . his own portion and then distribute my grace to the others to enjoy as they choose so that all who are in receipt of my unfailling generosity during the sacred days may celebrate without harassment, and banquet on places of their choice; and they are to be served from the chalices that I have consecrated t long as they participate in the public assembly in a sacred place.

[ll. 214-228] *Through these, as well as many other ways, I have set forth for the benefit of my children and my descendants a clear impression of the piety one ought to show towards the Gods and one's ancestor, and I expect them to imitate this fine example and ever increase the honor that are part of their family heritage, and that they will likewise, when they reach the peak of their own lives, add to my honors and thereby magnify the glory of their ancestral house. And if they do all this, it is my prayer that all the Gods of Persia and Macedonia and the homeland of Kommagene would remain propitiate and grant them every favor.*

[Danker, *Benefactor*, no. 41]

- The readers of Luke's story of Jesus' "Last Supper" would have recognized it as the foundation of their ongoing celebration of the "Lord's Supper." Might they have interpreted it as another type of memorial meal, as a way of fellowshiping with their departed Lord?
- Can you find other similarities between Christian sacramental meals and Greco-Roman funeral banquets?
- Can you think of important differences?

TWENTY-SECOND SESSION — LUKE 22:39-23:25
AN IRREGULAR TRIAL

Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may move every human heart; that the barriers dividing us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; and that, with our divisions healed, we may live in justice and peace; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. [ELW #304]

Read Luke 22:39-53.

- (156) Note carefully how Luke tells the story. All the disciples (not just three) are with Jesus as he prays (once, not three times) on the Mount of Olives (not “in Gethsemane”). They are to pray that they will avoid the test, while he prays that the cup will be removed. Neither prayer is answered, is it?
- (157) Profound sorrow makes one sleepy. Has this been your experience?
- (158) Not all Lukan manuscripts tell about the angel’s ministrations and Jesus’ bloody sweat. Why do you suppose some scribes omitted vv. 43-44? Because this makes Jesus look too human?
- (159) When the religious authorities come to get him, Jesus stops one disciple’s kiss and another’s swordplay. Only Luke mentions his healing touch. Even an “hour of darkness” doesn’t keep him from acting the role of a benefactor. Look for more such actions later in the story.

Read Luke 22:54-71.

- (160) Again, note how Luke’s version goes. Peter is around the fire in the same courtyard where Jesus is being held, but three times he insists he doesn’t know him. Then a rooster crows (just once, not twice) and “the Lord turned and looked at Peter.” Only Luke includes this detail. Do you suppose this is a look of reproach? Or disappointment? Or encouragement? Or forgiveness?
- (161) The guards play blind man’s buff with Jesus and challenge him to prophecy. But that’s what he has been doing all along, hasn’t he?
- (162) The religious leaders assemble—it’s not really a trial—and manage to get Jesus to admit that he is the “Messiah” and “Son of God.” Did he really say that?

Read Luke 23:1-12.

- (163) The assembly’s charges before Pilate are more “political” than “religious”—perverting the populace, resisting taxation, royal pretensions. Do Jesus’ teachings have political implications? For us?
- (164) Only Luke relates how Pilate sends Jesus to Herod, who taunts and toys with him, and returns him. What is the point of this?
- (165) Roman governor Pilate and Jewish king Herod inadvertently team up as witnesses to Jesus’ innocence. And in the process Jesus, the benefactor, reconciles a pair of enemies. How about that?

Read Luke 23:13-25.

- (166) Three times Pilate declares Jesus innocent, yet in the end he caves in and frees a terrorist named Barabbas. “Their voices prevailed”—is that the way it is? That those who speak the loudest and put on the most pressure are the ones who get what they want?

(167) By the way, did you notice that there is no “crown of thorns” in Luke’s story?

THE SELF-DEFENSE OF A WRONGLY-CONVICTED PHILOSOPHER

After Socrates of Athens (c. 469-399 BCE) was sentenced to death, he accepted the verdict and in due time ended his life by drinking hemlock in the company of his closest companions. One of his most loyal supporters, Xenophon (c. 430-354 BCE), later defended his mentor’s reputation by publishing his *Memorabilia*, a biographical account of Socrates’ teachings, and his *Apology*, a record of the philosopher’s defense at his trial.

(*Apology*, par. 24) *When the trial was over, Socrates remarked: “Well, gentlemen, those who instructed the witnesses that they must bear false witness against me, perjuring themselves to do so, and those who were won over to do this must feel in their hearts a guilty consciousness of great impiety and iniquity; but as for me, why should my spirit be any less exalted now than before my condemnation, since I have not been proved guilty of having done any of the acts mentioned in the indictment?”*

“For it has not been shown that I have sacrificed to new deities in the stead of Zeus and Hera and the gods in their company, or that I have invoked in oaths or mentioned other gods. And how could I be corrupting the young by habituating them to fortitude and frugality?”

(par. 25) *“Now of all the acts for which the laws have prescribed the death penalty—temple robbery, burglary, enslavement, treason to the state—not even my adversaries themselves charge me with having committed any of these. And so it seems astonishing to me how you could ever have been convinced that I had committed an act meriting death.*

(par. 26) *“But further, my spirit need not be less exalted because I am to be executed unjustly; for the ignominy of that attaches not to me but to those who condemned me. And I know that time to come as well as time past will attest that I, too, far from ever doing any man a wrong or rendering him more wicked, have rather profited those who conversed with me by teaching them, without reward, every good thing that lay in my power.”*

(par. 27) *With these words he departed, blithe in glance, in mien, in gait, as comported well indeed with the words he had just uttered. When he noticed that those who accompanied him were in tears, “What is this? Are you just now beginning to weep? Have you not known all along that from the moment of my birth nature had condemned me to death?”*

“Verily, if I am being destroyed before my time while blessings are still pouring in upon me, clearly that should bring grief to me and to my well-wishers; but if I am ending my life when only troubles are in view, my own opinion is that you ought all to feel cheered, in the assurance that my state is happy.”

(par. 28) *A man named Apollodorus, who was there with him, a very ardent disciple of Socrates, but otherwise simple, exclaimed, “But, Socrates, what I find it hardest to bear is that I see you being put to death unjustly!”*

The other, stroking Apollodorus’ head, is said to have replied, “My beloved Apollodorus, was it your preference to see me put to death justly?” and smiled as he asked the question. [LCL. vol. 168]

- Both Socrates and Jesus were convicted on the basis of perjured testimony. How does this fact contribute to your appreciation of these two?
- According to Xenophon, Socrates still appears to be in control of the situation, and he is able to benefit his followers. How about Luke’s picture of Jesus? Who is in control? Who grant benefits?
- Note that Socrates’ companions are with the philosopher. Where are Jesus’ companions when he died?
- Do either of these trials lead you to reflect on their fairness of our judicial systems today?

TWENTY-THIRD SESSION — LUKE 23:26-56
A PUBLIC EXECUTION

O God, your Son chose the path that led to pain before joy and to the cross before glory. Plant his cross in our hearts, so that in its power and love we may come at last to joy and glory, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. [ELW #71]

Read Luke 23:26-38.

- (168) Note the irony. Not Peter, but another Simon, carries a cross and follows Jesus (see Luke 9:23). What does this suggest about our own brand of “daily” discipleship?
- (169) All the gospels were written after Jerusalem was destroyed, but only Luke records Jesus’ words to the wailing women. “Weep for yourselves!” Would he warn us of some political disaster?
- (170) Jesus is crucified between two “outlaws” or “terrorists.” Does it make a difference what we call them? Does this type of state-sponsored execution have any political implications for Jesus? For us?
- (171) Only Luke records Jesus’ prayer for his Father to forgive. To forgive whom? The soldiers? The people? Us? Verse 34 is textually dubious, but again it pictures Jesus in his role as a benefactor.
- (172) “The king of the Judeans.” Does Pilate mean this ironically? Does Luke? Do you?

Read Luke 23:39-43.

- (173) Only Luke records the two criminals’ conversation. One adds to the insults directed at Jesus and demands royal salvation. If Jesus really was the Christ, why didn’t he save them all?
- (174) To the one who relents, Jesus—always the benefactor—promises a place in Paradise, “with me, today!” What does this imply about our own hopes for death and beyond?

Read Luke 23:44-49.

- (175) Luke signals the gravity of Jesus’ impending death with a three-hour solar eclipse (impossible, of course, at a full moon) and the ripping of a tapestry hanging in the temple. What does this mean?
- (176) Finally Jesus shouts his last utterance, as he commends his “spirit” to his Father (quoting **Psalm 31:5**), and then he “expires.” (No gospel says that he merely “died.”) What does this mean?
- (177) Jesus’ dying is followed by the centurion’s acclamation of his righteousness, the crowd’s sober return home, and his followers’ observance of the proceedings. What does this mean?

Read Luke 23:50-56.

- (178) Crucified corpses were normally dumped in the dump. Luke suggests a more honorable end for Jesus: rescue by a recognizably upright citizen, interment in a brand new tomb, and preparations for embalming. Do these burial details begin to reverse the ignominy of Jesus’ dying?
- (179) Note the role which the Galilean female disciples play. They observe Jesus’ death and burial on Friday and prepare embalming spices; they rest on Saturday; and they go to the crypt on Sunday. In other words, they are models of proper Jewish piety. Are you?

ESCAPE FROM CRUCIFIXION

Xenophon of Ephesus (not to be confused with Xenophon of Athens; see session 22) is the otherwise unknown author of what is the earliest known romantic novel, *The Ephesian Tale of Anthia and Habrocomes*, which likely dates from the 1st or 2nd century CE. In this fictional story, a newlywed couple are separated by chance and undergo a series of misadventures and escapes throughout the Mediterranean world before they are safely reunited. In the following episode Habrocomes, who has been taken captive as a slave and who believes his wife Anthia has been killed, is falsely accused of murdering a citizen and is sentenced to death.

[bk. 4, par. 2] ¹ *Meanwhile Habrocomes appeared before the prefect of Egypt, and the Pelusians had written him a report of what had happened, both the murder of Araxus and that it was a slave who had dared such deeds. Hearing the particulars and making no further inquiry into what had happened, he order Habrocomes to be taken away and crucified.*

² *He was dumbfounded by his misfortunes, but the idea that Anthia too was dead consoled him about his own end. His assigned escort took him to the banks of the Nile, where there was a sheer cliff overlooking the stream of the river. ³ They raised the cross and bound him to it, tying his hands and feet tight with ropes, for this is the local custom in crucifixion. They left him hanging there and went away, thinking that he was secured.*

⁴ *But he gazed at the sun and looked at the Nile stream, and said, "Kindest of gods, who hold sway over Egypt, through whom both earth and sky are revealed to all mankind, if Habrocomes has done any wrong, let me perish miserably and receive a worse punishment than this, if any there be, ⁵ but if I have been betrayed by an evil woman, may the Nile stream never be polluted by the body of one unjustly destroyed, and may you never see such a sight, a person who has done no wrong being destroyed on this your very own land."*

⁶ *This was his prayer and the god took pity on him: a sudden gust of wind arose, struck the cross, and blew away the soil on the cliff where the cross had been planted. Habrocomes pitched into the stream and was borne away; neither did the water harm him nor his fetters impede him nor the river beasts injure him, but the stream was his escort.*

⁷ *He was carried to the mouth of the Nile where it flows into the sea, and there the garrison arrested him and took him before the governor Egypt as a fugitive from justice. ⁸ He was even angrier than before, and taking him for an utter criminal ordered them to build a pyre, put Habrocomes on it, and burn him up.*

Everything was made ready, the pyre by the mouth of the Nile, and Habrocomes was put on it, while the fire was laid below, but just as the flame was about to reach his body he said more prayers, what little he could manage, to save him from his present misfortunes.

⁹ *And now the Nile crested and its stream fell on the pyre and extinguished the flame. To those present this event was a marvel, and they took Habrocomes and brought him before the prefect of Egypt, told him what had come to pass, and described the Nile's assistance.*

¹⁰ *He marveled at hearing of these events and ordered him to be guarded in the prison but to have every consideration "until" he said "we find out who this person is and why the gods care about him so much."*

[LCL, vol. 69]

- Fictional stories of crucified men who made a miraculous escape were commonplace in the Roman world. What might Greco-Roman readers have thought of the criminal's plea to Jesus to "save yourself, and us"?
- Compare the miraculous events in Xenophon's story with those in Luke's story.
- Compare Habrocomes' prayer to Ra, the Egyptian sun god, with Jesus' prayer to his Father.
- The observers in both stories concluded that the victim was innocent, that "this event was a marvel" or "a spectacle." What do you think?
- How would Greco-Roman auditors have reacted to these two stories? How do you react?
- By the way, consider state-sponsored executions—are they ever justified?

TWENTY-FOURTH SESSION — LUKE 24:1-35
A SURPRISING RESUSITATION

Almighty God, you give us the joy of celebrating our Lord's resurrection. Give us also the joys of life in your service, and bring us at last to the full joy of life eternal, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.
[ELW #83]

Read Luke 24:1-12.

- (180) Two dazzling men—angels?—confront the women. “Why seek the living with the dead?” they ask. “He’s not here. Rather, he woke up!” Can you think of a better way to summarize the Easter gospel?
- (181) In Mark (16:7) a single messenger tells the women to tell the men to go *to* Galilee. Here the two remind them of what Jesus told them while they were *in* Galilee. How do you account for this shift? Is it important?
- (182) Luke names the women who share this news with the eleven, the “apostles,” who think this is all a lot of incredible blather. Is disbelief a realistic response to a resurrection? Do you buy this story?
- (183) Peter inspects the crypt, notices the burial shrouds, and leaves flabbergasted. Do you think he is still unbelieving? Or does he now believe? Stay tuned for more on *Peter*!

Read Luke 24:13-27.

- (184) Why Cleopas and his companion (or wife?) could not recognize Jesus is not clear, but Cleopas’ recital of the facts is accurate: Jesus the Nazarene, a prophet, a healer, a teacher, condemned by the authorities, crucified, reportedly alive. Would you like to add anything to the list?
- (185) Was their hope that Jesus would “redeem Israel” misplaced? And, for that matter, what does it mean to be “redeemed” or “liberated”? Is this a political idea?
- (186) No precise passage “in Moses and the prophets” actually says that it is necessary for the messiah to gain glory *via* suffering. What could Luke be driving at here? How does he interpret Scripture?

Read Luke 24:28-35.

- (187) “Stay with us, for it is evening” expresses a profound longing, doesn’t it? Do you ever feel a yearning for the presence of Christ in your life? What is that like?
- (184, cont.) It’s their house, apparently, but Jesus usurps the role of host as he blesses and breaks bread. Then the other two can recognize him! Do we come to recognize Jesus in our Eucharistic meals? In our other meals? Does he vanish as soon as we see him?
- (183, cont.) As they report back to their friends in Jerusalem, they learn that “the Lord”—note Luke’s favorite title for Jesus—made an appearance to *Simon*. Can we determine when and where this happened?
- (188) Notice the mixture of emotional reactions in these paragraphs and the next: “they were sad,” “how foolish of you!” “our hearts burned within us,” “they were startled and terrified.” The story of Jesus’ resurrection evokes complex responses. How do you react—on an emotional level—to these tales?

THE RESURRECTION OF A FAMOUS TEACHER

The trial and subsequent appearance of Apollonius (see section 5) has similarities to Luke's story about Jesus.

[Book VII, chap. 41] *The next day Apollonius called Damis and said, "I have to make my defense on the appointed day, but you must walk to Dicaearchia, because it is better to go on foot. If you talk to Demetrius, stroll by the sea where the isle of Calypso is, because you will see me appear there." "Alive," asked Damis, "or how?" Laughing, Apollonius said, "To my way of thinking alive, but to yours, risen from the dead."*

[VIII. 4] *The courthouse had been arranged as if to accommodate an audience for a rhetorical display. All the famous people were there, since the emperor was striving to convict Apollonius before as many people as possible in order to implicate the three heroes [i.e. other defendants]. He however neglected the emperor so much as not even to look at him. His accuser attacked his neglect, and told him to keep his eyes "on the god of all mankind." So Apollonius turned his eyes to the ceiling, showing that he had his eyes on Zeus, and considering the man who accepted this impious flattery worse than the flatterer.*

[VIII.5.3] *When the Master said this [in answer to the emperor's questions], greater applause broke out than the emperor's court allows, and the emperor, thinking that those present were testifying on Apollonius's behalf, and somewhat affected by his replies, which were firm and sensible, said, "I acquit you of the charge, but you will remain until we converse in private." Apollonius however, summoned up his courage and said, "Thank you, Majesty, but because of these accursed men the cities are ruined, the islands are full of fugitives, the mainland of groaning, the armies of cowardice, and the senate of suspicion. Assign me a place too, if that be your wish, but if not, send someone to seize my body, because you cannot seize my soul, or rather, you can never even seize my body; 'you will not kill me, since I am not mortal.'" [quoting the Iliad, 22.13] So saying he disappeared from the court, taking good advantage of the situation*

[VIII.8.1] *. . . . when he had left the court in some supernatural way not easy to describe, the tyrant did not react as most people expected, since they thought this would make him roar with indignation, start a hunt for the master, and have it announced throughout the realm that Apollonius was to be forbidden admittance everywhere. He did none of this, as if counteracting the general belief, or finally realizing that he was powerless against the Master. . . .*

[VIII.10] *After producing this effect on the tyrant, and proving that the man whom all Greeks and barbarians feared was a mere plaything of his own wisdom, Apollonius left the court before noon, and about evening he appeared to Demetrius and Damis in Dicaearchia.*

[VIII.12.1-2] [While the two were talking] *with a loud groan, Damis said something like, "Gods above, will we ever see our good, noble comrade?" This Apollonius heard, since he was now standing at the entrance to the grotto. "You will," he said, "or rather you already have." "Alive?" asked Demetrius. "But if dead, we have never stopped weeping for you." Stretching out his hand, Apollonius said, "Take hold of me, and if I elude you, I am a ghost come back from Persephone's domain, like the ghosts the infernal gods reveal to men when they are overly despondent with grief. But if I remain when grasped, persuade Damis too that I am alive and have not lost my body."*

Unable to disbelieve any longer, they stood up, hugged the master, welcomed him, and questioned him about his defense. Demetrius thought that he had not even made one, but would have been put to death even when innocent, while Damis thought he had made one, but perhaps earlier and not that very day. But Apollonius said, "I have given my defense and won, and my defense took place today fairly early in the day, when it was getting towards noon." "How then," asked Demetrius, "have you come such a distance in so short a part of the day?" "Other than a ram or wings made with wax," said Apollonius, "you may imagine anything, but ascribe my safe conduct to a god."

- Would Greco-Roman readers have thought that Apollonius had actually died and come back to life? Would they have thought that about Jesus?
- Why was it important that Apollonius and Jesus appeared to their disciples?

TWENTY-FIFTH SESSION — LUKE 24:36-53
A FINAL APOTHEOSIS

Almighty God, you blessed Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, ascended far above all heavens that he might fill all things. Mercifully give us faith to trust that, as he promised, he abides with us on earth to the end of time, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. [ELW #100]

Read Luke 24:36-43.

- (189) Jesus' word of peace (in v. 36) and the demonstration of his hands and feet (all of v. 40) are absent from many of the best ancient manuscripts. Is this a problem for you? What do they add? Is it important?
- (190) What *is* important for Luke is that we are dealing with a real "flesh and bone" person, not a "spirit." They can see and handle Jesus' hands and feet, appendages which ghosts do not possess. In your opinion, is the physicality of the resurrection an essential part of the Easter faith?
- (191) Yet the disciples "were still disbelieving from joy, and marveling." It was just too good to be true! Do people still react to the Easter gospel with a combination of joy and doubt? How about you?
- (192) Ghosts don't ingest edible food, of course. But Jesus consumes a piece of broiled fish. Medieval scholars argued about whether he actually digested it! What do you think?

Read Luke 24:44-49.

- (193) Jesus' final instruction to his disciples emphasizes three points: **First**, everything about him—especially his passion and resurrection—are in accordance with the Jewish Scriptures (Moses, prophets, and psalms). Would you like to add some of his teachings and healings to this summary?
- (194) **Second**, a new idea is added: They are now the witnesses who must proclaim in his name repentance and forgiveness of sins to the non-Jewish nations. That includes us, doesn't it?
- (195) **Third**, they are not to start until they have received "power" from the Father. If you were a Greco-Roman reader not familiar with the story of Pentecost in Acts 2, how would you understand this promise? What kind of "power" are we talking about?

Finally, read Luke 24:50-53.

- (196) That same day, late Easter evening, Jesus departs from his disciples for the last time and is carried into the heavens. This obviously does not agree with the details of the Ascension story in Acts 1. What are some of the differences you notice?
- (197) Final farewells are often times of sorrow and pain. But not here! This is an occasion of blessing (he blesses them and they bless God), and worship, and great joy. But isn't that what a gospel—a piece of good news—should produce in us?
- (198) Luke's gospel ends where it began, in and around Jerusalem and the temple. In other words, the story of Jesus originates in sacred space. But soon it will spread out in ever widening circles. What does this suggest about our worship, and about our mission, as followers of Jesus?

THE ASCENSION OF A LEGENDARY HERO

In addition to his philosophical and ethical writings (see Conversation 17), Seneca also penned several dramatic tragedies. Two of these recount the final days of Hercules, the famed Greek hero, the son of Zeus. Hercules was famous for his feats of strength and his many adventures.

According to his legend, after he had defeated all his enemies he brought a captive mistress into his home. His jealous wife presented him with a poisoned cloak; when he put it on he became insane and murdered their two sons. When he realized he must soon die, Hercules embraced his fate, voluntarily went to his funeral pyre, and died with his integrity intact. Seneca's *Hercules Oetaeus* depicts his final utterances:

[line 1472] *"Tis well, 'tis over, my fate unfolds itself; this is my last day on earth. . . ."*

[1479-1487] *"We complain no more; such end was meet, that no living thing might conquer Hercules. Now let me choose a death glorious, renowned, illustrious, full worthy of myself. This day will I make famous. Go, cut down all the woods, heap Oeta's grove together, that a mighty pyre may receive Hercules, and that before he dies . . . perform this sad office for me; set the whole sky aglow with the flames of Hercules. . . ."*

[1725-1726] *"But lo! Now doth my father call me and he opens heaven. I come, O sire."*

A striking feature of this play is that it ends with Hercules' apotheosis, his ascent into the heavens. In the middle of his mother's song of mourning he calls to her from the skies:

[1940-1943] *"Why, since I hold the realms of starry heaven and at last have attained the skies, dost by lamentation bid me taste of death? Give o'er; for now has my valor borne me to the stars and to the gods themselves."*

[1972-1976] *"In living presence, mother, from the stars Alcides [i.e. Hercules] speaks. . . . But now 'tis meet that I pass to the realm above; Alcides once again has conquered hell."*

Hercules' mother is finally convinced of her son's ascension, and the final chorus prays that Hercules will continue to defend his admirers:

[1977-1981] *"Stay but a little!—he has vanished from my sight, is gone, to the stars faring. Am I deceived or do my eyes but deem they saw my son? My soul for very grief cannot believe it.—But no! thou art divine, and deathless the heavens possess thee. In thy triumphant entrance I believe."*

[1984-1997] *Never to Stygian shades is glorious valor borne. The brave live on, nor shall the cruel fates bear you o'er Lethe's waters; but when the last day shall bring the final hour, glory will open wide the path to heaven. But do thou, O mighty conqueror of beasts, peace-bringer to the world, be with us yet; still as of old regard this earth of ours; and if some strange-visaged monster cause us with dire fear to tremble, do thou overcome him with the forked thunderbolts—yea, more mightily than thy father's self the thunders hurl.*

[LCL, vol. 078]

- Note the parallels between Jesus and Hercules: divine sonship, mighty deeds, betrayal, resolution at the time of death, apotheosis or ascension into the heavens after dying. Are there others?
- Could Luke have intentionally narrated the story of Jesus according to a widely admired scheme such as that in the legends of Hercules? If so, would that have been helpful? Or not?
- How might Greco-Roman readers of Luke's gospel have evaluated the story of Jesus' ascension. Would they have believed it? Do you?