

READING LUKE BACKWARDS



Artisans of Hope, *Large Cross Nativity - Blue*, 2022, Negrese Volunteers for Change (NVC) Foundation, Inc., Bacolod City, Philippines, [Mosaic cross with nativity design made with broken ceramic tiles, 6 1/8 in. x 10 in.], www.nvcfoundation-ph.org.

Linked-In Learning • Lent 2022

Study Guide

NASSAU PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

How to Use this Guide

Everyone, leader and participants, should begin by reading the introduction for its important orientation to the theme for this study.

- * Participants can best prepare for each meeting by reading the assigned text in advance at least once. They can also read the material that will guide the discussion, although this is not necessary to enter into the discussion.
- * If you are unable to attend a small group or the adult education class, you can use this guide each week to prepare to hear the sermon in worship on Sunday or during the week on the Nassau Church website.
- * This guide can also help in your preparation for the adult education presentations. Or read the text and discuss the questions together as a family or couple.
- * If you didn't sign up for a small group because the times were not convenient, you can gather three or four friends on Zoom to talk about "Reading Luke Backwards" using this guide.
- * Leaders of small groups can prepare by reading the text in advance as well as looking over the discussion plan to see how it will fit your group and the events of the day. For suggestions and reminders about leading small groups in general and this series in particular, turn to page 16 of this guide.

However and whenever you enter into this study, bring your own questions as you grapple with this material and Christian discipleship today. May your faith increase even as you find new questions in these stories from the Bible.

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Introduction

Old rhythms and routines are returning in new ways. Small Group fellowship is also adapting to the new normal. Whether you opt for in-person or virtual groups, the promise that the Holy Spirit is present when two or more are gathered in God's name remains a constant.

Some stories are not meant to be read once and in order. Some stories are meant for us to revisit over and over again. The Gospel of Luke is such a story and our yearly journey through Lent provides an ideal opportunity to remember and learn anew the story of Jesus's cross and resurrection anew, afresh, and perhaps from a different vantage point.

And so we invite you to read the Gospel of Luke backwards this season. In a world turned upside down by pandemics and politics alike, how might we approach Easter if we start at the foot of the cross, at the threshold of the empty tomb? And what if we end the story where it starts, in the arms of Mary? From the end to the beginning, Luke narrates a good news that transforms a ruptured world.

Join us each Sunday morning as Eric Barreto, Weyerhaeuser Associate Professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, leads us (backwards) through the Gospel of Luke, examining not only the Biblical and historical context of Luke's narrative of Jesus' life and ministry but also its timely and timeless impact on our lives today.

Get linked-in for Lent! Each week small groups will study these Lukan texts from a more personal and contemplative point of view, and Pastor Davis will preach them in worship. Our hope is that this overlapping study and opportunity for reflection leads to a fuller understanding of union and reunion in the Christian faith and our own lives.



WEEK ONE

An Unjust Death

Lent and Easter invite us into multiple stories of the cross and resurrection. Luke's account of the cross focuses on Jesus' innocence and his unjust death at the hands of an empire that saw him as a threat to the order it had established. On the cross, we see a Jesus alongside others unjustly and cruelly executed by the machinations of various empires. Thus, we stand at the foot of the cross grieving what we have seen: an innocent person whose life an empire tries to take but whom God redeems.

Read Luke 23:26-43.

Exploring the Text

- * How have you understood the connections between the cross, the resurrection, and your faith?
- * How does Luke's account challenge, shift, and/or expand your understanding of Jesus' cross?

Preparing for the Sermon

- * It is very common near the end of Advent and on Christmas Eve to hear mention in sermons or prayers of the notion of "standing at the manger and looking toward the cross." What comes to mind when you ponder "standing at the cross and looking back to the manger?"
- * The image of the Son of God, the Savior of all people, as an innocent newborn underscores the painful reality of the still innocent Savior executed at the hands of those with power and authority. How does beginning Lent with this image re-orient or dis-orient this season for you?

Questions for Reflection

- * Read Luke 23:27–31. What do Jesus' words mean to you after two years and counting of living with a pandemic?
- * In Luke 23:32–39, several people mock Jesus. How do people, perhaps even ourselves, mock Jesus today, intentionally and unintentionally?



WEEK TWO

Confronting Caesar

In light of Luke's account of the cross, we can turn afresh to a number of well-known Lukan passages, including Jesus' famous and often misinterpreted call to "render unto Caesar." Often, this verse is used to encourage us to keep separate the political and the religious. Instead, the story calls us to count carefully what actually belongs to God and how much is left for a Caesar who claims to possess the world. What belongs to God if not everything! And if that's true, then what is left to give to Caesar?

Read Luke 20:20-26

Exploring the Text

- * How do you think about possessions and your faith?
- * In this story, what does it mean to "give to God what belongs to God?"
- * The title of this session is "Confronting Caesar." How is Caesar confronted in this passage?

Preparing for the Sermon

- * Jesus' response, "Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's" (v.25), has probably received the most attention, interpretation, and misinterpretation in the church's preaching tradition. What interpretations of the passage have you heard?
- * The notion that the religious leaders want to "lay hands on [Jesus] at that very hour" (v.19) and that they stalked him, launched a covert operation of untruth, and tried to trap him, is reflective of the insidious power of evil and sin in the hands of the empire. What do you think is behind this campaign of the religious leaders against Jesus?

Questions for Reflection

- * Having thought and talked more about this passage, how do you decide what "belongs to God?"
- * Knowing how Jesus ends up, how do you think this incident with the religious leaders set him up for the tragic ending?
- * How do we apply Jesus' answer to our lives as his followers today?



WEEK THREE

The (Not So) Great Dinner

Luke loves stories about food, about gathering around tables with sinners and righteous alike. Here, Jesus tells a story about a great dinner and paints a picture of the feast that awaits us all in paradise. The Jesus we meet in Luke consistently goes to the margins to find his dinner companions, not as a concession after all his friends have turned down his invitation. That is, this (not so) great dinner teaches us more about what a feast in heaven will not be like.

Read Luke 14:15-24

Exploring the Text

- * In what ways has food shaped your sense of faithfulness?
- * In what ways does the dinner party of Luke 14 fall short of the ideal of a great feast in heaven?

Preparing for the Sermon

- * Read all of Luke 14. How do these stories fit together?
- * The chapter begins with the notion that the religious leaders are primarily concerned about sabbath keeping and fulfilling the law. But with Jesus' observation of how the guests chose the places of honor, suddenly Jesus' teaching and the gospel itself start to hit way too close to home for the religious leaders – close enough to the religious and government leaders that they killed him. What in chapter 14 hits home for the church today?

Questions for Reflection

- * Where do you find yourself in the dinner story? Why?
- * If Jesus were telling this parable today, what excuses might he have for the invited guests?
- * What implications leap out at you in verse 24?

REFLECTIONS

PRAYERS



WEEK FOUR

Blessed Are...

Jesus' Sermon on the Plain promises nothing less than a reversal of the order of a world that privileges raw power, excessive pride, unrestrained greed by highlighting the poor, the meek, the disinherited as beneficiaries and exemplars of God's promised reign. Alongside blessing, Jesus also names woe to those who have already received their "consolation."

Read Luke 6:20-26.

Exploring the Text

- * How do we distinguish between blessing and privilege?
- * What is an indispensable insight for you in reading the Sermon on the Plain?

Preparing for the Sermon

- * One cannot read Jesus' "Sermon on the Plain" in Luke without comparing and contrasting it to his "Sermon on the Mount" in Matthew (5:2–12). What is similar and different in the two accounts?
- * As you compare the two gospel accounts, make sure you go beyond simply the present of "woes" in Luke. Look at Matthew's "woes" in 23:13–36. Why do you think they are separated from the blessings and how do they compare to Luke's "woes"?

Questions for Reflection

- * How does Jesus' teaching in Luke 6:20–26 change in emphasis if you begin at the foot of the cross and the crucifixion?
- * As you think about your own circumstances, where is there hope in this passage for you?
- * What messages from this passage are relevant today for Christians? For Nas-sau Church?



WEEK FIVE

Power and Justice: Temptation in the Wilderness

Following on the heels of Jesus' baptism when a voice from heaven named him God's beloved child, the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness. There, Jesus faces temptation, supported by the Spirit and the belief that God was with him. At the center of the temptation account is Satan's promise to give Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, kingdoms Satan now controls. Jesus' faithful response is an invitation to ponder the shape of power and how we might hone our expectations of God's good reign.

Read Luke 4:1-13.

Exploring the Text

- * Why does Jesus face temptation in this story?
- * What kinds of power do you find yourself exercising in everyday life?
- * In Luke's account, it is implied that Jesus was tempted the entire 40 days by the devil. How does that alter how you understand the three temptations that are described?

Preparing for the Sermon

- * Finding a fresh takeaway in the narrative of Jesus in the wilderness being tempted by the devil is challenging. But when you are reading Luke backwards the temptation of nourishment, earthly power, and the notion of being able to save oneself with the help of God sounds a lot like what happened at the foot of the cross. How do these passages compare and connect for you?
- * The devil's temptations never really changed. The role of the temptor shifted from spiritual mythology to real life power and empire. What is significant about each temptation in light of the crucifixion?

Questions for Reflection

- * What kinds of power do you find yourself exercising in everyday life?
- * How does white privilege enter into the discussion of temptation and power?
- * How might your life and faith be different if temptation (of any sort) were not present? Would it be better or worse?



WEEK SIX

A Believer, A Prophet

We end where Luke's narrative begins: with Mary's faithful consent and her prophetic declaration. Typically, we read about Mary's choice and her song in the Christmas season. In light of Good Friday's cross and Easter's promise of resurrection, how might Mary's bold belief help us meet Jesus once again? This story will remind us of Mary's faithful teaching of Jesus, and the anguish and grief she must have experienced throughout Jesus' life. It is also one of the sources of the prophetic and prayerful proclamation of God's transformative kingdom that marked Jesus' own ministry.

Read Luke 1:39-56.

Exploring the Text

- * What connections might we draw between the stories of Christmas and Easter?
- * What characters from the Christmas story might we bring into the Easter season and vice versa?
- * In what ways might Mary's faithfulness reflect and shape your faith?

Preparing for the Sermon

- * Yes, Mary's Magnificat was a song that went way past Bethlehem. She sings of more than simply Jesus' teaching. She sings of all in his life and witness that led to the reaction of those in power. In her song, what does Mary name that led to her suffering and her son's crucifixion?
- * The Gospels tell of Mary standing with the other women watching in horror as they murdered her son. Where do you think she was at the time of the Triumphal Entry? What more did she know than others and how might she have observed it differently from them?

Questions for Reflection

- * Create a timeline beginning with Luke 23:26–43. Mark each Lukan passage we have discussed on it, ending with Luke 1:39–56. At each passage, write the ideas or actions that connect it to the previous passages. What do you observe on your timeline?
- * We often take the sting out of Mary's song by setting it in quiet music or reading these words in a young girl's voice of acquiescence. How would you show the change in tone and topic between verses 50 and 51?
- * Think of the various groups in your neighborhood or in the neighborhood around Nassau Church. Who would find good news in Mary's words? Who would be discomforted?



Notes for Small Group Leaders

Leading a small group is not quite the same as leading a Bible study. While the goal of a Bible study would be to increase biblical knowledge, the primary goal for a small group is to deepen relationships among the participants as each one grows in relationship with God and Jesus and as Christ's disciple.

At the first gathering, take time to review the group covenant on the back page of this booklet. It is important that each member of a small group is clear about the guidelines that make for a successful time together. Invite the group to add to the covenant.

A simple process for each week could be:

- * Ask the opening question (see below).
- * Prayer
- * Read or invite a group member to read the Bible passage or selections from it aloud. For the longer passages, recap the story.
- * Read and discuss the questions in "Orienting Ourselves to the Text."
- * Read and discuss the questions in "Exploring the Text."
- * Draw attention to Preparing for the Sermon. If you have time, consider discussing one or both questions. If not, encourage the group to read and think about them before Sunday.
- * Present one or more questions for reflection.
- * Invite prayer requests and close with prayer.

Opening Questions

To help the participants become better acquainted, and especially if anyone in your group doesn't know the other participants, invite everyone to answer a question at the beginning of each gathering. This time also helps the group make the transition of what has been occupying their minds to enter into the small group discussion space. Suggested questions are below, but feel free to come up with your own.

- * Week 1: What was a memorable Easter for you, at any age and for any reason?
- * Week 2: What prized possession(s) do you cherish?
- * Week 3: Recall a memorable meal you have had. What made it memorable?
- * Week 4: When has something in your life been completely reversed?
- * Week 5: What kinds of temptations are hardest for you to resist?
- * Week 6: As the gap between rich and poor widens in our country, what most disturbs you about this?

Give the group a moment to think about their response. You can model the amount of time for each person by answering the question first. You may need to remind them to keep their answers short from time to time; there is much more to discuss. Anyone may choose not to answer.

Questions for Reflection

These questions at the end of each session can be discussed in the group. However, if time is short, invite two or three responses and encourage the participants to think about them on their own during the coming week. At the opening of the next meeting, invite comments on the reflection questions.

May leading your small group be a joy and a recognition that where two or three are gathered, Christ is among them. May "Reading Luke Backwards" refresh the Season of Lent for you and the small group. Thank you.

GROUP COVENANT

- * What happens in the group stays in the group. To build and maintain an atmosphere of trust, confidentiality is essential.
- * Speak and make space for others to speak. Each voice is important. If you are usually quiet, make an effort to offer your thoughts. If you speak out easily, hold back for others to speak or invite someone who hasn't spoken to speak.
- * Stay with the group. Physically, be present at each gathering rather than treat attendance as just another option. Mentally, listen to others and participate.
- * Focus on ideas, not the person. If you disagree, disagree with the idea, but don't belittle the person.
- * Speak from your own awareness. When offering an opinion, claim it as your opinion rather than make generalizations.
- * Everyone in the group is a learner. In a small group, there are no experts. Learning is a lifelong process.