

LENT  
*for*  
EVERYONE

LUKE

YEAR C

*A Daily Devotional*

N. T.  
WRIGHT

WJK WESTMINSTER  
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## ASH WEDNESDAY

Luke 1.1–56; focused on 1.46–55

<sup>46</sup>Mary said,  
‘My soul declares that the Lord is great,  
<sup>47</sup>My spirit exults in my saviour, my God.  
<sup>48</sup>He saw his servant-girl in her humility;  
From now, I’ll be blessed by all peoples to come.  
<sup>49</sup>The Powerful One, whose name is Holy,  
Has done great things for me, for me.  
<sup>50</sup>His mercy extends from father to son,  
From mother to daughter for those who fear him.  
<sup>51</sup>Powerful things he has done with his arm:  
He routed the arrogant through their own cunning.  
<sup>52</sup>Down from their thrones he hurled the rulers,  
Up from the earth he raised the humble.  
<sup>53</sup>The hungry he filled with the fat of the land,  
But the rich he sent off with nothing to eat.  
<sup>54</sup>He has rescued his servant, Israel his child,  
Because he remembered his mercy of old,  
<sup>55</sup>Just as he said to our long-ago ancestors –  
Abraham and his descendants for ever.’

Think of the last time you badly wanted something to happen and had to be patient. Maybe you were waiting for someone you loved to come home from a long trip. Maybe it was an all-important letter that took for ever to arrive. Remember what it felt like, day after day, to feel your patience getting stretched thin. Sometimes, perhaps, hope seemed to run out altogether.

Then, one day, it happened. Or rather, the first tell-tale signs arrived. The plane touched down. The letter with the crucial postmark landed on the mat. And the celebration began – began in your heart and soul, and perhaps in your voice as well. Even before the person appeared, even before you opened the letter, you started to dance inside with joy, relief, excitement. Everything was going to be all right now.

Now imagine that waiting going on for hundreds of years, through the memory and imagination of a small, embattled nation. Put yourself in their shoes. Things have gone from bad to worse. Powerful foreigners have trampled all over us. The world seems upside down, with the rich and arrogant always coming out on top. But we've been promised that one day a new world will be born in which everything will be turned the right way up at last and we will be rescued. And the one who has promised us all this is – the creator of the world! Surely he can't fail, even if he keeps us waiting?

Then, one day, it happens. Or rather, it doesn't happen yet, but the first tell-tale sign arrives. A young woman, saying her prayers and keeping the family hope alive, is shocked to get a message. 'It's happening! It's happening now! And it's happening *in and through you*. You are going,' says the angel, 'to have a son. (Yes, I know, there's no human father in sight.) He will be God's chosen one to put everything right at last.'

Mary knows full well that a virgin, which she still is, can't be pregnant. So the small stirrings of new life in her body are the sure sign that the world's creator is doing a new thing. The letter has arrived on the mat. It's time for the celebration to begin.

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

### Today

As you read Luke with many other Christians this Lent, come with your hopes and longings, your awareness of the ways in

which the world is still out of joint. You might begin, today, by thinking about some situations, whether in your own life or far away, where the world is not yet right. Hold them before God in prayer and patience. And then look for the signs of hope around you, the first stirrings of God's new life. And give thanks to God for the way in which he is at work in the world today.

There's a long way to go. But the party begins here.

## THURSDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

Luke 1.57–80; focused on 1.67–79

<sup>67</sup>John's father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit, and spoke this prophecy:

<sup>68</sup>Blessed be the Lord, Israel's God!

He's come to his people and bought them their freedom.

<sup>69</sup>He's raised up a horn of salvation for us

In David's house, the house of his servant,

<sup>70</sup>Just as he promised, through the mouths of his prophets,

The holy ones, speaking from ages of old:

<sup>71</sup>Salvation from our enemies, rescue from hatred,

<sup>72</sup>Mercy to our ancestors, keeping his holy covenant.

<sup>73</sup>He swore an oath to Abraham our father,

<sup>74</sup>To give us deliverance from fear and from foes,

So we might worship him, <sup>75</sup>holy and righteous

Before his face to the end of our days.

<sup>76</sup>You, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest One,

Go ahead of the Lord, preparing his way,

<sup>77</sup>Letting his people know of salvation,

Through the forgiveness of all their sins.

<sup>78</sup>The heart of our God is full of mercy,

That's why his daylight has dawned from on high,

<sup>79</sup>Bringing light to the dark, as we sat in death's shadow,

Guiding our feet in the path of peace.'

Pause, shut your eyes for a moment, and imagine. You are Elisabeth, the childless woman in the village. Everybody thought you were too old to have children, but now you've just had a son. You don't know for sure, but often you used to feel that people were pointing at you or talking about you behind your back. 'What a shame,' they seemed to be saying. 'It's so sad. Nobody to care for her in her old age.' Sometimes you wondered if they were saying that God had put a curse on you...

But now there's already quite a little crowd around you. Friends and neighbours have squashed into the little house, all excited and eager to have a peek at the little baby. Who's he like? How come it happened so late in life? What'll he be when he grows up?

But something else is going on as well. Your husband has been struck dumb ever since the news that the baby's on the way. Nobody knows what's going on but it adds to the strangeness, and the excitement. And then the moment arrives. *What's the baby's name?* Everybody assumes he'll have his father's name. But no: the father is doing something. He's writing something down: 'His name is John.'

No time to wonder why, because suddenly the old man can speak again. And, like champagne bubbling out of a hastily opened bottle, what comes out is a stream of praise. You find yourself caught up in it. All the old promises have come true, and this little baby is going to walk in front of them to tell people to get ready! God promised David a son, and Abraham a great family, through which he would rescue his people and the whole world – and it's happening at last! And this newly named boy, John, will be in the middle of it.

As you stand there, awestruck, can you sense something happening in yourself as well? Can you hear a voice, saying to you, 'Yes, it's true; I am doing a new thing; and you have a part in it!'

## Today

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

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

## FRIDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

Luke 2.1–21; focused on 2.8–15

<sup>8</sup>There were shepherds in that region, out in the open, keeping a night watch around their flock. <sup>9</sup>An angel of the Lord stood in front of them. The glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

<sup>10</sup>‘Don’t be afraid,’ the angel said to them. ‘Look: I’ve got good news for you, news which will make everybody very happy.

<sup>11</sup>Today a saviour has been born for you – the Messiah, the Lord! – in David’s town. <sup>12</sup>This will be the sign for you: you’ll find the baby wrapped up, and lying in a feeding-trough.’

<sup>13</sup>Suddenly, with the angel, there was a crowd of the heavenly armies. They were praising God, saying,

<sup>14</sup>‘Glory to God in the highest,  
and peace upon earth among those in his favour.’

<sup>15</sup>So when the angels had gone away again into heaven, the shepherds said to each other,

‘Well then; let’s go to Bethlehem and see what it’s all about, all this that the Lord has told us.’

As a shepherd, you’d be used to having the sheep follow you with a kind of blind obedience. In the Middle East, to this day, shepherds don’t need sheepdogs to tell the sheep what to do. They just set off ahead of the sheep. The sheep trust them

to take them to places where, in an often dusty and stony landscape, there will be water to drink and grass to nibble. So off they go.

Now imagine you were one of those shepherds out on the hills near Bethlehem, suddenly finding that instead of leading your sheep to where they can get food, someone else is telling *you* to go and find something – *someone* – who’s lying in a feeding-trough! How absurd is that? Your first reaction might well be, ‘This is some kind of a joke. I must have been dreaming.’

But no: all your companions have seen and heard it as well. So we have to be sheep, now, do we? Why is that?

Back comes the answer, sung to music the like of which you’d never imagined before: ‘The great Shepherd himself has been born! The King is here, and you are his sheep, his people! Come and find him!’

And, as a sign that you’re not just having a kind of collective hallucination, something remarkable and unlikely: the baby, when you find him, will be lying in a feeding-trough. You’ll see, and you’ll know.

Pause, and think prayerfully about what sort of decision it takes to do what the angels were insisting. This is quite crazy. Things like this don’t happen – especially not to me. And, even supposing that this really might be the boy-king who would be the shepherd of God’s people, it could be dangerous. Perhaps we shouldn’t get mixed up in stuff like that. Better to lie low, to stay quiet, keep your head down.

But then...supposing this was the moment towards which your whole life had been leading? And supposing you messed it up and missed it out? You wouldn’t want to spend the rest of your days kicking yourself for not being there at the most important moment in your own life.

So off you go. And it’s true, however unlikely. There is the baby, in the feeding-trough. The message was right. So they

really *were* angels after all. And – equally unlikely – so this really *is* the boy-king, David’s son. To think you might have shrugged your shoulders and not turned up!

### Today

Pause and pray about the quiet messages you get from time to time; perhaps not angels singing, but a soft whisper that tells you to go somewhere unexpected, to do something you hadn’t planned, to visit someone you weren’t previously thinking about.

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

## SATURDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

### Luke 4.1–13

<sup>1</sup>Jesus returned from the Jordan, filled with the Spirit. The Spirit took him off into the wilderness <sup>2</sup>for forty days, to be tested by the devil. He ate nothing during that time, and at the end of it he was hungry.

<sup>3</sup>‘If you are God’s son,’ said the devil, ‘tell this stone to become a loaf of bread.’

<sup>4</sup>‘It is written,’ replied Jesus, ‘“It takes more than bread to keep you alive.”’

<sup>5</sup>The devil then took him up and showed him, in an instant, all the kingdoms of the world.

<sup>6</sup>‘I will give you authority over all of this,’ said the devil, ‘and all the prestige that goes with it. It’s been given to me, you see, and I give it to anyone I like. <sup>7</sup>So it can all be yours . . . if you will just worship me.’

<sup>8</sup>‘It is written,’ replied Jesus, ‘“The Lord your God is the one you must worship; he is the only one you must serve.”’

<sup>9</sup>Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and stood him on a pinnacle of the Temple.

‘If you are God’s son,’ he said, ‘throw yourself down from here;<sup>10</sup> it’s written that “He will give his angels a command about you, to look after you”;<sup>11</sup> and “They will carry you in their hands, so that you won’t hit your foot against a stone.”’

<sup>12</sup>‘It has been said,’ replied Jesus, “‘You mustn’t put your God to the test.’”

<sup>13</sup>When the devil had finished each temptation, he left him until another opportunity.

I saw an advertisement the other day for a particular car. The makers were very proud of the fact that this car had been put through all kinds of tests to see what would happen to it under the most extreme conditions. The car had come through with flying colours.

That’s what you do with a car. But we don’t often think about it happening to you and me. And yet that’s what this passage is about. It’s about Jesus going through the test, and coming through with flying colours. And since it’s a test we have all failed, it’s worth pondering, prayerfully, what Jesus was actually achieving and how it can help us, this Lent and throughout our lives.

What was it like, being Jesus? That’s a huge and difficult question, but Luke wants us at least to try imagining the scene as though it was happening to ourselves.

First, he was very hungry; but he had learned self-control over his own body.

Second, he knew (because he’d just been told at his baptism) that he was indeed the one whom God was calling to be Messiah, King of Israel and the world; but there was a right way and a wrong way of becoming what God wanted him to be.

Third, he knew he had to bring God’s people on side with what he was called to do; but again there would be a right and a wrong way of doing that.

To say ‘this can’t have been easy’ is a huge understatement. There is a sense in this story of a deep wrestling, a heart-searching, a personal struggle with the powerful pull of bodily

appetites, ambition and prestige. Most of us know only a little of that struggle, because we tend to give up and give in, early on in the process. Jesus went all the way through the tests and still didn't break.

That is part of the point for us now. This is the start of Jesus' own story, pointing already to the cross where he will hang in humiliation, powerless, his body tortured to destruction. But Luke encourages us to hear its echoes in our own story.

### Today

Stand there beside Jesus as he faces those tests.

What tests are you facing right now? How are the whispering voices trying to lure you off course, into doing the right thing in the wrong way, or the wrong thing altogether? Where will you look in scripture to find help and strength?

*Lord, give me the strength not to give up; to reach for your word, to remember what you are calling me to be and to do and, with your help, to persevere through whatever tests may come.*

## WEEK 1: SUNDAY

### Psalm 91.1–2, 9–16

<sup>1</sup>You who live in the shelter of the Most High,

Who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,

<sup>2</sup>will say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress;  
my God, in whom I trust.'...

<sup>9</sup>Because you have made the Lord your refuge,  
the Most High your dwelling-place,

<sup>10</sup>no evil shall befall you,

no scourge come near your tent.

<sup>11</sup>For he will command his angels concerning you  
to guard you in all your ways.

<sup>12</sup>On their hands they will bear you up,

so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.

<sup>13</sup>You will tread on the lion and the adder,  
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.

<sup>14</sup>Those who love me, I will deliver;  
I will protect those who know my name.

<sup>15</sup>When they call to me, I will answer them;  
I will be with them in trouble,  
I will rescue them and honour them.

<sup>16</sup>With long life I will satisfy them,  
and show them my salvation.

Notice what this Psalm does *not* say.

It doesn't say you won't be in dangerous places.

It doesn't say you won't be faced with wild and threatening animals.

It doesn't say you won't find yourself in serious trouble.

It says that God will protect you against harm.

It says that you won't need to be afraid of the wild animals, and that you'll be able to trample them underfoot.

It says that God will be with you in trouble, and will rescue you.

It is, in other words, a song with its feet on the ground, even while its heart is praising the living and rescuing God.

It's a good Psalm for Lent, because Lent is a journey that may take us to some difficult and awkward places – in our outward journey of work, family life, church commitments, and other responsibilities, and in our inner journey of moral struggles and spiritual questionings, as we search for God and his ways more deeply than we had before. All these journeys are potentially hard and dangerous, as was Jesus' forty-day fast in the wilderness, with the wild beasts around him and the demons whispering in his ear.

It's at this point that we discover just how dangerous the journey is. Because one of the things the devil whispered in Jesus' ear was a quote from this very Psalm. Perhaps Jesus had memorized it ahead of time and was already using it as a prayer,

day by day, to help him through the tough test he was facing. And the devil, seeing he isn't going to succeed by a direct assault on Jesus' senses or appetites, tries a different tack: 'If you really believed this Psalm, then wouldn't you trust God so much that you could throw yourself off the Temple? Doesn't it say he'll send his angels to protect you? Perhaps you don't believe it after all. Perhaps you're just pretending...'

It was actually a bad verse to choose, because the very next line contains the promise that we shall trample the serpent underfoot – which, ever since Genesis 3, had been read as a promise about the coming Child of Eve who would crush the head of the devil himself. Often the right answer to a puzzle in the scriptures, and to the difficulty of praying with them, is to read on, to pray into the wider context and setting, and watch the puzzles resolve and the difficulties recede.

A Psalm for the Lenten journey, then: a prayer that Jesus made his own, and that we can make our own as, with fear and trembling, we set off with him.

### Today

Julian of Norwich said, 'Jesus did not say you will not be tempest-tossed. But he did say, "You will not be overcome."' We don't know what we're going to face, but only that God's sheltering care is assured.

Place yourself under his protection. There is no better place to be.