

## NATIVITY OF OUR LORD: LESSONS AND CAROLS | DECEMBER 24, 2022

LUKE 1-2

*We have come together as Christmas draws near to prepare for our celebration of the birth of God's beloved Son. Through the days of Advent we have followed the light of Christ, and now we travel in spirit with Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem to acclaim with the multitude of the heavenly host the coming of the Prince of Peace. Through Scripture and silence, prayer and song, let us hear again the wonderful story of our redemption, and, hearing, let us rejoice and respond with lively faith.<sup>1</sup>*

The service of lessons and carols traces its roots back to nineteenth century England.<sup>2</sup> At the time, many of the Christmas carols we know and love were considered not fit for use in worship. People in Victorian England thought of “We Three Kings” and “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen” the way we might feel about “White Christmas” or “All I Want for Christmas is You.” Most clergy believed they were better suited for singing in the home or—as was often the case—the pub. But in 1880, Right Rev. Edward White Benson created a new service that would bring these beloved carols into the church's celebration of Christmas. And if it happened to bring people out of the pubs, well, so much the better.

But Benson's service wasn't all carols. In between the hymns were readings from scripture beginning with the fall in Genesis, continuing with the covenant to Abraham and the visions of the prophets, and culminating with the annunciation to Mary. If you listened to lessons and carols from King's College in Cambridge this morning, you heard this same set of readings. You might go to lessons and carols expecting to sing your favorite carols, but you would leave having heard the sweep of salvation history.

Some of the hymns that we will sing tonight are the same ones that Benson's contemporaries sang a century ago. But the sequence of readings that we'll be hearing tonight will be different. Instead of hearing selections from across the Hebrew Bible, we'll be hearing of the events leading up to Christ's birth in St. Luke's gospel. This is a lively story with memorable characters. But I want you to draw your attention to two dynamics that run side-by-side in Luke's telling.

One theme is the particular. Luke's gospel is deeply concerned with the ways that individuals live and act in the world. Think of the parables that Luke's Jesus tells, so famous we often refer to them in shorthand. The prodigal son. The good Samaritan. The rich fool. The rich man and Lazarus. The widow's mite. Luke is not concerned with people in general or people on average or people in theory. Luke is concerned with how particular people live in relationship with God and their neighbors.

And you will see the same focus in tonight's readings. The characters in these stories are not just stand ins—Jesus's mom and dad, Jesus's aunt and uncle—but are fully-developed characters with histories and interests and concerns. We will hear of Mary, the befuddled but courageous mother of Christ, Elizabeth, the wise and caring mother of John, and Zechariah, the priest who knows all about God but remains skeptical of God's promises. God does not act through people in general, but through individuals with all their particular hopes and dreams and eccentricities.

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<sup>1</sup> Italics text adapted from the Church of England.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Forsyth, *A Christmas Cornucopia: The Hidden Stories Behind Our Yuletide Traditions* (Penguin UK, 2016).

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The second theme is the universal. Among the four gospels, St. Luke's is unique in that it has a second volume: Acts of the Apostles. This continuation of the gospel tells of how the Holy Spirit made the disciples "witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Luke's story of Pentecost tells how God creates new connections across boundaries of language and geography.

And sure enough, Luke sees Jesus's birth as an event of universal importance as well. When Mary sings her song of praise, she rejoices that God has remembered the promise to Abraham, a promise that, through Abraham and his descendants, all the nations of the earth would be blessed. And shortly after Jesus's birth, a man named Simeon will tell Mary and Joseph that their son was born not just "for glory to your people Israel," but also as "a light for revelation to the gentiles."

The particular and the universal. So often, our tendency is to think of the two as in conflict. We might worry that to acknowledge the lived experience of particular individuals and communities means to disregard the experiences of others. Or on the other hand, we might believe that the only way to address universal concerns and aspirations is to gloss over our unique situations in life.

Luke wants us to see these two dynamics not in conflict but supporting one another. That this one particular person, a Jewish child born in dusty Bethlehem, is of universal importance to everyone who has ever lived. And that any movement for universal rights, justice, and liberation finds its source and goal in the particular life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

We will hear of both the particular and the universal dynamics of God's love in all the readings for tonight. But we will see them mostly clearly in tonight's final reading, when an angel tells a group of shepherds, "To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah." We might wonder: does the "you" in that story mean these shepherds? Or does the "you" mean all of us gathered here tonight? Luke's answer, of course, is *Yes*.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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<sup>3</sup> George Hunsinger, *The Beatitudes* (Paulist Press, 2016), 83.