

***Crossways International Handout for Gospel Readings—  
December 27; January 3, 6, 10, 17, 24, and 31***

**December 27, Christmas 1: Luke 2:41-52**

This section of Luke focuses on an incident that took place in Jesus' youth. It is unique in the canonical Gospel narratives. It presents Jesus as a faithful Jewish boy, raised by Joseph and Mary in the traditions of Israel, and observing what the Law required at that time in relation to observing Passover. With this episode, the infancy narratives end just as they began—in the setting of the Jerusalem Temple.

**Vv. 41,42:** The events outlined parallel those in the presentation narrative, 2:22-35: a journey to the Temple; a manifestation; Mary's sorrows; return to Nazareth; a reference to growth. A number of Lucan themes surface: the need for Jesus to go up to Jerusalem; the contrast between the Israel of the past and the new Israel; Jesus the prophet—whose message is closely connected with His divine Person.

Although at one time the Jewish Law required every adult male to be present in Jerusalem for the feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles (Deuteronomy 16:16), later those who lived at a distance were expected to attend only the Passover celebration. Some pilgrims left after two days, while others remained for the solemn assembly seven days later. Mary, being a woman, was not legally required to go up to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. Perhaps she chose to do so because of her piety.

**V. 43:** When the "Galilee group" began to return to their homes, Jesus (without His parents' knowledge) chose to stay in Jerusalem—possibly because of the "magnetic" attraction of the Temple. It seems a little strange that Joseph and Mary did not know that He was not among their returning community. Apparently they assumed that He would be somewhere within their possibly large group—a group that consisted of relatives and friends.

**V. 44:** However, after traveling for a day, they begin looking for Jesus.

**V. 45:** Because they do not find Jesus, they return to Jerusalem to search for Him there.

**V. 46:** They eventually find Jesus—after three days of separation. Without doubt, they suffer some emotional turmoil during these days. Perhaps the stress foreshadows what Mary endures during Jesus' time on the cross and in the tomb—a three-day period when she does not expect to see her Son alive again.

Eventually Joseph and Mary find Jesus in the Temple at the center of a group of teachers who form a circle around this Teacher *par excellence*—even though He is only twelve! Jesus not only listens to them; He also asks them questions. The theme of Jesus teaching in the Temple is referred to numerous times in John's Gospel; see John 5:16ff; chs. 7-8; 10:22ff. Even so, there comes the day when Jesus' attack on the Temple system costs Him His life; see Luke 19:45-48 and Jeremiah chs. 7, 26, 36.

**V. 47:** Those who listened to Jesus in the Temple "were amazed (a strong term denoting supernatural manifestation) at his understanding and his answers." Here, note also 19:47, 48—and the different responses of the priests and the laypeople.

**V. 48:** Mary's words point to an understandable anxious pain in her heart.

**V. 49:** Here we read Jesus' first recorded words in Luke's Gospel—words that reflect the first recorded words of His mother, Luke ch. 1. They reflect His total dedication to knowing and doing

His Father's will. Although His words, "I must be in my Father's *house*" can also be translated, "I must be about My Father's *business*," Luke's focus on Temple themes favors the first translation. For twelve years, Jesus had been calling Joseph as His "father"—as does also Mary in v. 48. Both Mary and Joseph would have been puzzled when Jesus used the term in a new way—applying the term to His heavenly Father.

**V. 50:** That Mary and Joseph do not understand is surprising—considering the preceding nativity events and the visit of the angel Gabriel.

**Vv. 51, 52:** These verses contain Luke's last reference to Joseph: Jesus "was obedient to *them*." Naturally, Mary was challenged to give a lot of thought throughout her life to the identity of the Child to whom she had given birth.

### **January 3, Christmas 2 : John 1:(1-9) 10-18**

*John 1:1-14 was dealt with in relation to Christmas Day in the previous set of pericope studies. However, we include those insights once again, and add comments for 1:15-18.*

#### **John 1:1-14**

The Gospel of John has no Christmas story. John's prologue (as this section is called) begins not with history, but with eternity. Years ago, a movie was produced titled, "From Here to Eternity." John's Gospel begins with the coming of God's Son "from eternity to here."

The first three verses give us poetry, not with rhyming endings, but with the kind of biblical poetry found in the Psalms. Various statements form parallel lines of thought with further developments, usually reaching a climax. The first five verses might be translated and set out the following way:

In the beginning was the **Word**,  
and the **Word** was with God,  
and the **Word** was God.

He was in the beginning with God.  
All things were **made** through Him,  
and without Him was not anything **made** that was **made**.

In Him was **life**,  
and the **life** was the **light** of all people.  
The **light** shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Each group develops a new but related thought: the Word as God; creation through Him; life and light through Him. Only vv. 6-8 and 15 (the verses that speak of John the Baptist) do not have a clear poetic form.

#### **Vv. 1-5: From Eternity**

The first verses sound familiar. They recall the beginning of Genesis, "In the beginning when God created the heaven and the earth..." However, the "beginning" here in John is not in time; it belongs to eternity where there is no time. The Word has always existed with God, has always been God. Christ did not become a person at the birth of Jesus; He only became a man. In the eternal realm, He has always been at God's side.

He is the one through whom God spoke to the prophets to reveal Himself and His will. He is also the Word through whom God created all things. Since He was God's agent at creation, everything has life in the Son of God.

But the description of the Son as Life and Light reminds us that He gives life and the light of God's truth in another final sense. True life, what John often calls "eternal life" (see 3:15, 16, 36; 4:14, 36 etc.), only comes from faith in Jesus after He has enlightened our minds with the truth of God.

No mention is made of the Fall described in Genesis, but the word "darkness" recalls the truth that fallen humanity loves the darkness of ignorance and sin rather than the light of God's saving truth (see 3:19,20). Nevertheless, this dark world has not been able to snuff out the light, even though it put to death the Son of God. Rather, the light now shines more brightly, and the Word rings out more clearly.

### **Vv. 6-8: The True Witness**

The Word was God; John the Baptist was only a man. While the Word was always "*with God*," John was "*sent by God*." John's role was to be no more than a first witness who defended Jesus' claim to be the Son of God and the Light of the world, 8:12. Refusing the spotlight, John pointed away from himself to Jesus. Why is this humility stressed again in v. 8? It is interesting to note that well into the second Christian century there were disciples of John the Baptist who claimed that he was the Messiah and the Light. John's Gospel rejects any such idea once and for all. Every time John is mentioned, he is placed below Jesus; his subordinate role is stressed (see Acts 19:1-5).

### **Vv. 9-13: The True Light**

Here the stage is set for the drama of the Gospel. Not John, but Jesus, is the true Light. But the tragic irony of history is that the world that He has created does not recognize Him. His own people, the Jews who have the Hebrew Scriptures, do not welcome Him as they should. From the beginning, He is attacked, rejected, and accused of being a fraud.

But is Jesus' story all tragedy and doom? Certainly not! There are those who believe in His name—that is, believe in all that He is and represents. Faith in Jesus gives the disciples the right to be called children of God—not merely products of human birth ("blood," "flesh," "will of man" all describe the normal biological process of conception and birth). The child of God has to be reborn by the will of God and by the power of the Holy Spirit; see 3:3.

### **V. 14: Glory Revealed**

Magnificent words!! God stopped speaking to us as an invisible voice. The Word became a Person whom people could see and touch. The timeless Son becomes a little baby—all to show us God's grace and truth, to give us a glimpse of God's own glory. Israel and Moses were terrified at the vision of God's glory at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19:16-21; Hebrews 12:18-21); the prophet Isaiah was struck with fear when he saw the glory of God in the Temple, Isaiah 6:1-5. But there is no fear in the vision of God's glory seen in the Father's only dear Son. Grace, truth, glory: all have been seen in Jesus who was crucified and Who rose from the dead to show that God's glory is to forgive sinners and to restore them to His way of life—as revealed in His Son, the forgiving Savior and Servant Lord.

Amazingly, in the person of Jesus, God "tabernacled" among us in the flesh. Furthermore, when we look at Jesus' life and listen to His words, we see and hear God's grace (redeeming love) and truth (faithfulness to His promises).

**V. 15:** This verse points to the preliminary servant role of John. In the first words he speaks in this Gospel (repeated in v. 30), John points to the superiority of Jesus. In the ancient world, the “one who comes after” is the slave or servant who walks a respectful distance behind his master. However, Jesus is the servant of God (Isaiah 53), but not the servant of John the Baptist. He submits to His Father, not to John.

**V. 16:** Jesus ranks higher than John because “He was before me” in the sense that He has always existed—long before John was born. The Older One has the greater authority. Jesus repeats this argument in 8:58, “Before Abraham was, I Am.”

**V. 17:** Jesus the Messiah was and is greater than Moses. Moses was a servant of God, but not the Son who possessed the fullness of God; see Hebrews 3:2-6. The Law that God gave through Moses did not give the final picture of God’s grace and truth. This revelation came only with the Son who knew the Father perfectly.

**V. 18:** To be in someone’s bosom denotes to be in the closest possible relationship with that person; see 13:23-25. Jesus is thus above the Law, and this is what John’s prologue suggests from its very first verse. The Jews believed that the Law was always with God, that the Law was the light of humanity, that the Law revealed God’s glory. John says, “No! If we are to see God, we must see Him in Jesus, the Son of God. Only in Him is there the ‘fullness’ of God”; see Colossians 1:19, 2:9.

## **January 6, Epiphany: Matthew 2:1-12**

*What follows consists of afterthoughts to Christmas Day.*

When a child is born in the West today, the parents notify the immediate family by phone and send cards to close friends. In some cases, they place a birth notice in the local paper or in the church bulletin. When Jesus was born, those who helped with the birth in Bethlehem would have been the first to know about it. But the official “birth notice” was given on a more grand scale, Luke 2:8-14. It was given by none other than an angel of the Lord. And after the announcement was made, a heavenly choir *proclaimed* (note: they did not *sing*) words that remain one of the church’s timeless treasures, Luke 2:14.

To whom did they proclaim those words? Shepherds! What an anti-climax—shepherds! The news of Jesus’ birth was not announced to the successful and powerful living in palaces in Jerusalem and elsewhere. It was announced to those classified as outcasts. After all, shepherds worked on the Sabbath and sometimes permitted their flocks to graze on land belonging to others. Furthermore, because they cared for animals belonging to others, the owners feared that the shepherds might kill one of their animals and share its meat with their immediate family. Shepherds were not permitted to give evidence in a court of law. They were not even permitted to enter the Jerusalem Temple!

But something dramatic happened that first Christmas night. When the angel of the Lord delivered the message of Jesus’ birth to the shepherds, the “*glory of the Lord* shone around them,” Luke 2:9. At that time, the religious leaders taught that the glory of the Lord dwelt in the Jerusalem Temple, specifically above the Foundation Stone located on the floor at the center of the Holy of Holies.

What was the Foundation Stone? The Babylonians destroyed the Ark of the Covenant when they destroyed Solomon’s Temple in 587 B.C. When the postexilic community rebuilt the Temple, naturally they felt the need for a symbol of God’s presence. Rabbinic tradition says they found the very stone Jacob used for a pillow while sleeping at Bethel (Genesis 28) and placed it where the Ark of the Covenant had previously stood. The High Priest, who entered the Holy of Holies only once each year on the Day of Atonement, sprinkled the blood of a goat on the Foundation Stone to atone for the sins of the people. With the birth of Jesus, the glory of the Lord is out of the Temple, incarnate in Jesus, and revealed first to outcasts.

The rabbis also taught that the Foundation Stone was “the navel of the earth”—the location where creation began and from which it spread out. It was the holiest place on earth. The next most holy place was the Holy of Holies in which the stone was located; the next the Holy Place; the next the Court of the Priests; the next the court of Jewish men; the next the court of Jewish women; the next the court of the Gentiles; the next, Jerusalem; the next, the Holy Land; and the next, the world beyond the Holy Land. However, the Christmas story is not about the most Holy *Place* but the most Holy *Person*. He is, and in Him dwells, the glory of God—and the outcast shepherds were the first to be told about His birth.

When the shepherds rushed to Bethlehem to see for themselves what had been told them, they found the Person who is the key to time and eternity in a simple manger in a simple house. And being shepherds, they would have felt no hesitation to enter the house stable where He lay. No doubt they would have listened with astonishment when they heard the story in fuller measure from Joseph and Mary, and perhaps from hosts and helpers in the house. Even more, having heard and seen, these “outcasts” glorified God and told others!

For centuries, the people of God had prayed to God that He would rend the heavens asunder and come down to rescue them and restore them as a nation, Isaiah 64:1,2. Their prayers were answered on that first Christmas night when God came down the “back stairs” of Bethlehem, through the “servants’ entrance,” and placed Himself in the crook of a simple woman’s arms. But as time went by, the people discovered He had not come to rescue them from the Romans, but from themselves and their sins, Matthew 1:21. Indeed, a remarkable beginning to the revelation of God’s final, eternal, heavenly Truth!

### **WELCOME, GENTILES!**

Only Matthew records the visit of the Wise Men from the east, 2:1-12. They came to Jerusalem looking for a child born king of the Jews, and spoke of having observed a star at its rising; note Numbers 25:15-19, and the reference to “star” and “scepter” in v. 17. They consulted with Herod the Great. He, in turn, consulted the city’s chief priests and scribes who said the expected Jewish Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, quoting Micah 5:2.

When the wise men resumed their journey, the star that they had seen at its rising reappeared, led them to Bethlehem, and hovered over the house where Jesus was. They entered the house and presented Jesus with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The 10<sup>th</sup> century monk Aelfric wrote,

Gold befits a king; frankincense belongs to the service of God; with myrrh they treat the bodies of dead men so that their bodies decay less rapidly. The gold signified that He is a true king, the frankincense that He is true God, the myrrh that He was then mortal; but now He remains immortal in eternity.

Eventually the wise men left for their own country. Although Herod had asked them to inform him of the child’s whereabouts, they did not do this—having been warned by an angel in a dream not to honor Herod’s request.

*Tradition* says that the wise men were three in number; after all, there were three gifts. *Tradition* assigned them names: Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. *Tradition* says they rode camels. But these notions remain, at best, traditions. There might have been four or more wise men, and they might have traveled by donkey, camel, or on foot.

The Greek word from which the term *magi* is derived refers to a wide variety of people, including fortune-tellers, priestly augurs, astrologers, and magicians. Some suggest that the wise men came from Babylonia, or Persia, where the word *magus* originated. A strong tradition suggests they came from present-day Jordan and that they were astrologers.

There is good reason to believe that the *magi* were Gentiles, for if they had been Jews, they would have known better than to ask King Herod about the birth of a national ruler who might challenge his dynasty. Matthew does not tell us why they wanted to pay homage to a Jewish king, or what they learned about Him from their observations of “his star,” Matthew 2:2.

Some astonishing things are beginning to emerge. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the first to visit Him were those viewed as outcasts by the nation’s religious leaders. The next to visit Him were Gentiles.

This is all the more remarkable when it is remembered that at that time, there were those in Israel who despised the Gentiles and referred to them as “spittle,” 2 Esdras 6:55,56 (Apocrypha). There were those in Israel who detested the Edomites and Philistines, and referred to the Samaritans as “foolish people,” Sirach 50:25,26 (Apocrypha). There were those in Israel who longed for God to pour out His vengeance on the Gentiles, Isaiah 61:2. There were also those who hoped that one day the treasures of the Gentiles would be brought into their land to become theirs, Isaiah 61:6. In the midst of all this, Matthew tells us that some of the wise among the Gentiles willingly brought their treasures to the Christ Child. It would seem that God was fulfilling His people’s dreams in a *radical way*—in *His way*!

When the Wise Men visited Herod the Great, most likely they met with him in Jerusalem. As they made the five-mile journey south to Bethlehem, they would have seen on the horizon, about 2\_ miles south of Bethlehem, a fortress known as the *Herodium*. The fortress, built by Herod, was the only site to carry Herod’s name. Its ruins can be seen still today.

The Herodium was a large round structure built on a hill and encircled by a cone-shaped miniature mountain. The fortress was reinforced by three semicircular towers, and by a fourth much higher round tower that possibly housed catapults. This higher tower had a solid base so that the vibrations and recoil of the catapults would not damage it.

The structure was not only a fortress, but also a magnificently furnished palace, well supplied with water and gardens. Entry was by means of an underground passageway with 200 steps leading up from the bottom of the hill on which it was located. The Herodium served as the district capital and as a monument that could be seen from a distance.

Although Herod could look to his large bodyguard and many fortresses and palaces to ensure his security, he felt fear when told that a “king of the Jews” (*that was Herod’s title!*) had been born somewhere in his realm, and tried to deal with the threat by murder, Matthew 2:3,16. Although Joseph and Mary rescued Jesus from certain death at Herod’s hands, other very young boys in Bethlehem were not so fortunate, Matthew 2:16.

Although Herod died in Jericho, he was buried in the Herodium with great pomp and ceremony. Josephus writes:

Everything was done by Archelaus to add to the magnificence of the ceremony; he brought forth all the royal ornaments to be carried in procession in honor of the deceased. The bier

on which his body was carried was of solid gold, studded with precious stones and draped with the richest purple embroidered with various colors. On it lay the body wrapped in a crimson robe, with a diadem resting on the head, and above that a golden crown and the scepter by the right hand.

*(War 1:33.9)*

Herod lies dead in the vicinity of the Herodium. The site of his tomb on the slopes of the hillside on which the Herodium is located was discovered in 2007. The “Bethlehem Babe” whom Herod planned to murder is alive and well, and is enthroned as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Earthly rulers and earthly kingdoms rise and fall, and come and go. However, the Kingdom established by Bethlehem Babe will continue to all eternity!

### **January 10, Epiphany 1: Luke 3:15-17, 21, 22**

The contents of Luke 3:1-18 were dealt with in the insights offered for Advent 2 and Advent 3 in the previous set of pericope studies. However, 3:15-17 surfaces again in the present pericope and Luke’s account of Jesus’ baptism (3:21,22) is added.

The background to today’s selection is huge. In the preceding chapters we are told about Zechariah and Elizabeth (a virtual outcast) being promised a child, the annunciation to Mary, Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, the birth of John the Baptist, Jesus’ birth, the proclamation of the angels, the visit of the shepherds, and Jesus’ visit to the Temple.

Some big names are listed in 3:1,2 (Emperor Tiberius, Governor Pilate, Herod and Philip, Annas, and Caiaphas). Jesus’ ministry will have implications for all—for those in positions of power as well as for the lowly. Although John the Baptist could have had a prestigious job as a Temple priest, he is out in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He proclaims a new beginning to the history of God’s people—a new and final Exodus, 3:4-6.

John addresses his audience in terms that few preachers would want use today. He addresses them as a brood of vipers (imagine using that one!) who are fleeing their coming, deserved judgment as serpents ahead of a grass fire. Their boasts about being descendants of Abraham are meaningless. If they do not repent, if they do not change their whole way of thinking and living, they will be cut down as a useless tree. They are to share their clothing and food with the needy. The “money boys” (tax collectors) are to be scrupulously honest. The “military boys” are to be satisfied with their wages and never to resort to lies or threats to extract money from people. Is it not true that nothing much has changed in our world, and today’s humanity needs to hear John’s message as much as did the people of his day?

**Vv. 15-17:** When some of John’s hearers entertain the idea that he might be the long-awaited Messiah, John says “No!” One much more powerful than he is coming! John is not even worthy of doing the task of a Gentile slave (untie the thong of His sandals) for that Coming One! The Coming One would baptize His hearers, not merely with water, but with the Holy Spirit and fire (reflecting the Pentecost events described in Acts 2). He will thresh humanity as a farmer threshes grain. He will gather those who heed His call to believe and follow in His Eternal Kingdom, but totally reject those who do not!

These are powerful proclamations! How are we to get the truths embedded in them into the hearts of humanity today? Sad to say, many in affluent countries prefer to hear a message that assures them that God wants them to enjoy a prosperous and so-called blessed life. However, Jesus finished up on a cross naked, and never linked being blessed to what a person possesses and enjoy. He linked the term only to serving Him in His distressing disguises, Matthew 25:34-36.

In a book that Crossways International published soon after the events of September 11, 2001, the suggestion was made that the leaders of the world travel to the moon, look back at Planet Earth, and ask, “Who made that planet and who owns it?” Next, they should return home, share a meal together (“We are family! We shall serve and help each other without limit!”), and then wash each other’s feet (in the Spirit of Jesus, the Servant Messiah). There is no other Peace Plan that will work!

In vv. 18-20, Luke reports John’s imprisonment by Herod Antipas. John had attacked Herod for marrying Herodias—who had divorced her previous husband Philip (a brother of Herod Antipas) so that she might marry Herod Antipas.

**Vv. 21,22:** Two short verses that convey a huge message! Although vs. 21 states that Jesus was baptized, it does not state that it was John the Baptist who performed that act. The other Gospels address that issue more specifically.

Isaiah 64:1,2 expresses the hope that the day would come when God would tear open the heavens and come down to rescue His people. That hope finds fulfillment in Jesus’ incarnation and ministry.

Although Joel 2:28 expressed the hope that the day would come when God would pour out His spirit on all flesh (all within Israel), Joel ch. 3 expressed the hope that the day would come when God would crush the Gentiles even as a person crushes grapes in a wine-press. Jesus “edited” those expectations in a rather radical manner.

Finally, a voice speaks from the heavens. In Jesus’ day, rabbis believed that God spoke to His people through the Torah, through a prophetic voice, and through a heavenly voice. The heavenly voice that speaks on the occasion of Jesus’ baptism declared Him to be *King* and *Servant*. “You are my Son, the Beloved” is a quote from Psalm 2:7—a coronation psalm; in Jesus, the Davidic dynasty is being restored to God’s people. “With you I am well pleased” (Isaiah 42:1) is a quote from Isaiah’s first Servant Song.

The implications of the message of the voice from the cloud were enormous for the people of Jesus’ day, and remain so for God’s people (and all humanity!) still today. God’s Good News to us today has to do with more than being forgiven and assured of going to heaven. His Good News has to do with being forgiven “the old way” of life, and transformed to walk “the Jesus way” through life. How the world needs to listen, understand, believe, and respond!

### **January 17, Epiphany 2: John 2:1-11 (12)**

John refers to Jesus’ miraculous deeds as “signs” that make a theological statement in relation to Jesus’ ministry. The first of these took place at Cana in Galilee. Jews were in the minority in Galilee and came into repeated contact with Gentiles—who were regarded as being ritually unclean and a source of defilement. After each encounter with Gentiles, Jews had to make themselves ritually clean once again by means of a ceremonial washing; see Mark 7:3,4.

Jesus attends a wedding celebration at Cana in Galilee where, in the course events, the hosts run out of wine. To run out of wine at a wedding is a social disaster, and brings disgrace on the family. The couple celebrating their marriage might read the situation as one that will bring bad luck on their future life together. Jesus goes to their rescue. He tells servants at the celebration to fill six stone jars with water—up to the brim. (Water in these jars would have been used for purification rites. Water used for this purpose had to be in *stone* jars. After all, if jars are made out of *clay*, water poured into them can infiltrate the clay and be rendered ceremonially unclean—making it unfit for use in purification rites.) When the servants draw out the contents of the jars, they find that it has been changed. The hosts now have access to an estimated 150–225 gallons of very good wine!

A number of Old Testament passages suggested that, when the Messiah finally came, there would be an abundance of wine, Amos 9:13; Joel 3:18. The non-canonical 2 Baruch 29:5 says something similar.

The earth will also yield fruits ten thousandfold. And on one vine will be a thousand branches, and one branch will produce a thousand clusters, and one cluster will produce a thousand grapes, and one grape will produce a cor of wine. (*The measure referred to as “cor” is uncertain; estimates vary from 35 to 60 gallons.*)

When Jesus creates an abundance of wine at Cana, He declares that the Messianic Age has come. Furthermore, water intended for use in ritual washings is transformed into wine that makes the heart glad. Where Jesus is present, all previous purification rituals and practices are superseded. To be in Jesus’ presence is to experience unending joy. Jesus alone establishes and sustains humanity’s relationship with the Father.

It seems that John presents Jesus as turning water into wine on a “seventh day.” Note the following: 1:1, day one; 1:29, day two; 1:35, day three; 1:43, day four; 2:1, three days later. Total: seven. As God rested on the seventh day (Genesis 2:1-3), so Jesus brings His people rest from rituals such as purification rites on a seventh day. Indeed, He brings us eternal Sabbath Rest!

Furthermore, John makes reference to *seven signs* that Jesus performed during His earthly ministry: 2:1-12; 4:43-54; 5:1-16; 6:1-15; 6:16-24; 9:1-41; 11:1-44. Furthermore, there are seven scenes embedded in the narrative describing Jesus’ healing of a blind man (each beginning with the following verses: 9:1, 7b. 13, 18, 24, 35, 40), and seven scenes in His trial by Pilate (each beginning with the following verses: 18:28, 18:33, 18:38b, 19:4, 19:8, 19:13).

**January 24, Epiphany 3: Luke 4:14-21**

**January 31, Epiphany 4: Luke 4:21-30**

*It is misleading to divide Luke 4:14-30 into two sections. Hence, the comments that follow deal with the larger passage. If the passages are dealt with on two successive Sundays, people need to be made aware of the implications of the larger narrative. The notion that those present in the Nazareth synagogue when Jesus preached His first sermon in His home town were impressed with what they heard is totally misleading. They were furious—to the point of wanting to kill Him!*

Luke’s temptation narrative is given in 4:1–13. It reverses the second and third of the three episodes Matthew lists in his narrative, Matthew 4:1–11. Luke’s *opening scene* takes place in the Temple (1:8-10), the *third temptation* takes place in the Temple (4:9-12), and the setting for Luke’s *final narrative* is the Temple, 24:53. The religious and political powers that call for Jesus’

crucifixion have links to that structure and to the system carried out within its walls.

After His baptism and temptation, Jesus returns to Galilee, begins to teach in synagogues, and is initially praised by everyone, 4:14,15. But the tone changes. On one occasion, Jesus is invited to preach in the synagogue in His home town, Nazareth, 4:16–30. He begins by reading Isaiah 61:1,2 and a section of 58:6 (“to let the oppressed go free”)—passages that pointed to the coming of the Messiah and to conditions that would prevail during the Messianic Age. After reading them, He states, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Indeed, in Jesus, the Messianic Age has come! Some are puzzled by what Jesus says. Some become angry and ask how it is possible that a mere “son of Joseph” can say such things and make such a claim.

Jesus’ opponents understand that Jesus read selectively from Isaiah—which He was entitled to do according to rabbinic tradition. However, they are furious that He makes *no reference* to the following hopes expressed in Isaiah 60:1–61:6:

- \* God’s glory will embrace His so-called Chosen People forever, 60:2. Oppression by other nations will cease, 61:1.
- \* Rulers and people of other nations will come to the Holy Land, bringing with them their wealth—across the oceans in ships and across the land on camels, 60:3, 5b, 6, 11, 61:6b. Indeed, God’s people will suck into their own land and hands the wealth of the Gentiles as a child sucks milk from its mother’s breasts, 60:16a.
- \* God will pour out His vengeance on any Gentile nation that will not serve the Jewish people, 60:12, 61:2a. Gentiles will rebuild any Jewish structures that they have reduced to rubble (60:10a), using the best of timbers from Lebanon in the process, 60:13; see also 60:17. They will also free God’s people from having to do menial tasks such as caring for animals and farming the land, 61:5. Possibly the suggestion is also that God’s people will be spared having to do menial tasks so that they might devote life to studying the Torah, their scriptures.
- \* Diaspora Jews scattered around the Mediterranean world will return to the Holy Land, bringing their silver and gold with them, 60:9.
- \* God’s people will live in their land in peace and security, 60:18. The gates that lead into their towns and cities will always remain open, 60:11a. The people will all be righteous, possess the land forever, and increase greatly in numbers, 60:21,22a.

When Jesus’ hearers express their rage toward Him, He responds with words indicating that, although His hearers believe that they, as Jews, are God’s genetically special people, in Old Testament times God used Elijah and Elisha to minister to *Gentiles*, to *non-Jews*. Elijah ministered to the widow of Zarephath; Elisha ministered to Naaman, a leper from Syria. If Jesus’ audience rejects what He has to say, God will turn His attention to the Gentiles once again. At this, Jesus’ hearers become enraged, drive Him out of Nazareth, and make plans to kill Him by throwing Him off a cliff.

Jesus survives, leaves Nazareth, and travels to Capernaum, 4:31. (*If* Jesus traveled there that same day, He certainly traveled farther than the Torah permitted on a Sabbath.) While teaching in a synagogue there, Jesus casts a demon out of a man in His audience—again, on a Sabbath! Those present are amazed by what they see, and news about Jesus begins to spread far and wide, 4:31-38. Next—and still on the Sabbath—Jesus heals Simon Peter’s mother-in-law, 4:38,39. When the sun sets (and the Sabbath is over!), people flock to Jesus seeking to be healed and to be freed from demonic control, 4:40,41.

It is significant that when Jesus exorcizes demons, they—the enemy—recognize who He is, even though His own people do not. It is also possible that the demons tell Jesus that they know His name and who He is to indicate that He can have no power over them—and to suggest that they have power over Him. In many parts of the world still today, to know a person’s name is to have power over that person. Nonetheless, Jesus demonstrates His power over the demons by silencing them.

Next morning, when Jesus goes to a deserted place, the crowds go looking for Him. When they find Him they beg Him to remain with them. However, Jesus continues to preach in the synagogues of the region, 4:42-44.

It is significant to note that many people in today’s world embrace the same nationalistic and materialistic hopes and dreams as did many Jewish people in Jesus’ day. Jesus calls preachers, teachers, and parents today to make people aware of the deception embedded in these hopes and dreams, and to teach and inspire them to walk His Servant Way—“out of step” with the ways of the world.