



breadfortheworld
HAVE FAITH. END HUNGER.

January 1, 2012 First Sunday after Christmas

By Ruthanna B. Hooke

Isaiah 61:10–62:3

Psalm 148

Galatians 4:4–7

Luke 2:22–40

It is astonishing how quickly the shadow of the cross falls over the glory and merriment of Christmas. In Year A of the lectionary, the First Sunday after Christmas brings the horrific story of the massacre of the children ages two and under in Bethlehem. The readings today offer Luke's account of Jesus' presentation in the temple, a joyous occasion that nevertheless has ominous overtones. While Simeon rejoices that he has lived to see the Messiah, he also predicts that this child will cause opposition among the people of Israel, leading to the falling and rising of many. Jesus' coming means that everyone is faced with a choice: whether they believe in him or reject him. This theme of division, with the necessity of choice, runs through the passage from Galatians as well. Here too the coming of Christ has led to a decisive parting of the ways between old and new ways of being. From the perspective of apocalypticism, this difference is not between Judaism (old) and Christianity (new), but between ways of living that are complicit with the old age of sin and death and ways of living that seek to be aligned with the present and coming realm of God. Readers are compelled to choose which way they will go. Only Isaiah and Psalm 148 retain the tones of pure rejoicing.

Luke 2:22–40

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is presented as a Messiah whose mission in many ways follows that of the Hebrew prophets. One way in which Jesus' course parallels that of the prophets is that his coming divides people. Simeon first announces this future path, and his pronouncement is programmatic for the entirety of Luke–Acts. Throughout these books, those who encounter Jesus are divided: some receive him, and some reject him. Two reasons explain this mixed response, both related to Jesus' behavior as a prophetic Messiah.

First, the prophet proclaims—and, in Jesus' case, also brings about—the divine reversal, in which, as Mary proclaims in her Magnificat, the powerful are cast down from their thrones and the lowly raised up (Luke 1:46–55). This program causes division. On the one hand, many people, including the poor, sinners, tax collectors, women, people with leprosy, and some of the wealthy, accept this promise. Significantly, Mary, a woman, first announces God's program of transformation, and Anna welcomes Jesus when he is presented in the temple. On the other hand, many of the rich, the members of the establishment, are threatened by this promised reversal. They reject and ultimately kill Jesus.

Second, Jesus' offer of salvation is offensive to some because it includes not only sinners and others within his own people, but also Gentiles. Simeon predicts that the child will be a light to the nations. In his sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus draws on the prophets to assert that Gentiles have a place in salvation and that through Jesus' ministry God is inviting Gentiles to participate in the fullness of salvation in the present and



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future (Luke 4:25–27; see 1 Kgs. 17:1–16; 2 Kgs. 5:1–14). The church in the book of Acts extends Jesus’ mission by reaching out to Gentiles. For Luke, Jesus’ messiahship is a means whereby the Gentiles are included in the promises of God. As we see in Luke 4:25–30, this offends the residents of Jesus’ hometown enough that they are prepared to throw him off a cliff.

The social justice implications of this text are evident: the coming of Jesus that we celebrate at Christmas presents us with a clear choice as to which side we are on and which God we serve. Are we on the side of justice for poor people, women, and sinners? Or are we on the side of the rich and powerful, those who “have received [their] consolation” (Luke 6:24)? Do we stand with the God of Israel on the side of radical inclusion?