The first Sunday of Advent began a new liturgical season and a new cycle of liturgical readings. The focus in Year C is on the Gospel of Luke. Like each of the evangelists, Luke has a unique portrait of Jesus and a specific message for his community. This column will suggest some concrete steps to help the preacher become more aware of the historical, literary, and liturgical context of this Gospel so that Jesus’ words can once again be actualized: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21).

Step 1—Read Through the Whole Gospel of Luke
The most important step is the first step: a prayerful reading of the whole Gospel. Before one studies about the Gospel of Luke one should study the Gospel itself. Read not only the Gospel but also the Acts of the Apostles, since these two volumes form one complete work. As you read, note words or phrases (e.g., “salvation,” “forgiveness”) that seem to recur or echo throughout the Gospel and Acts. Luke is fond of creating parallel scenes. As you are reading through Luke-Acts are there stories that seem similar to previous stories? Highlight and compare some of these. Begin to pick up some of Luke’s vocabulary and images and bring these into your meditation and preaching.

Step 2—Study the Historical Context of this Gospel
It is important to study the historical context of this Gospel to avoid anachronisms and misinterpretations. Major resources such as the Anchor Bible Dictionary, Raymond Brown’s Introduction to the New Testament, and especially Joseph Fitzmyer’s Anchor Bible commentaries on Luke and Acts will aid one in discovering the historical context and setting of this Gospel.

Most scholars would agree that Luke wrote his Gospel sometime around A.D. 85 for a predominantly Gentile community, perhaps in Antioch of Syria. His primary source was the Gospel of Mark. His Gospel is more complete than Mark’s (“everything . . . from the very first” Luke 1:3) including both an infancy narrative and a number of additional sayings of Jesus that are not found in Mark’s Gospel (e.g., the Sermon on the Plain, the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son). While the authenticity of the adscription of the third Gospel to Luke, the beloved physician (Col 4:14), continues to be challenged,
Fitzmyer has given strong reasons for the acceptance of this attribution. The author of this Gospel is a second generation Christian (1:2-3) and sometime companion of Paul (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1–28:16).

While Luke did not write history in our modern understanding of the term, he does follow the historical canons of his own time. Like any good historian, he has done his homework, "investigating everything carefully from the very first" and is now prepared "to write an orderly account" for his patron "most excellent Theophilus" (1:3). He is careful to place his story within the people and events of world history: "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness" (3:1; cf. 1:5). As this last phrase about the word of God indicates, Luke is writing something more than history. He is writing salvation history, the story of God's offer of salvation to all peoples (2:30-32).

Step 3—Study the Narrative Context of the Gospel

If Luke is a careful historian, he is even more so a skilled and careful author. The preacher should try to become aware of his narrative techniques such as his use of parallelism and foreshadowing. Luke's favorite technique is parallelism: he highlights a number of parallels in Luke-Acts: the annunciation, birth, and presentation of John (1:5-25; 1:57-58; 1:59-80) and Jesus (1:26-38; 2:1-20; 2:21-40); the spirit-filled programmatic speech of Jesus (4:14-21) and Peter (Acts 2:1-41); and the words spoken at the death of Jesus (23:34, 46) and at the death of Stephen (Acts 7:59, 60). These parallels help to connect the story of John the Baptist and Israel to the story of Jesus as they also connect the story of the Church to the story of Jesus.

Luke does not end his story with the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He continues his story in Acts. The prologue of Acts indicates clearly that he intends this book to be a continuation of the first: "In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven" (Acts 1:1-2). Luke also purposely ends the Gospel and begins Acts with the story of the ascension (Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:9-12) to link these two works together.

This literary context highlights Luke's christology and ecclesiology: the story of Jesus continues in Acts, the story of the Church. Luke, therefore, "models" for us in Acts how to apply the story of Jesus to a new historical and liturgical context. For example, the Gospel ends in an open-ended manner with a promise of future events: "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (24:46-47). This prophecy forms the program for Acts and for the Church throughout the ages.

Step 4—Study the Liturgical Context of the Gospel of Luke

The program of the Church is to preach Jesus' message of repentance and forgiveness. This proclamation usually takes place within a liturgical context. The liturgical celebration can be viewed as a connected narrative or story. The proclamation of the Gospel and indeed of all of the readings is not done in isolation but in a liturgical context. This context of gathering, greeting, and opening prayer influences how the word is heard and recreated. It provides a guide to hearing the Scripture proclaimed.

The wider context of the liturgical season also influences how the Gospel is heard. The first reading from the Old Testament
is chosen to correlate with the reading from Luke. A narrative thread runs from the first reading to the Gospel reading. The second reading provides a subtheme or countertheme.

Step 5—Guided Reading of the Gospel of Luke

The final step is to study the Gospel under the guidance of a “mentor.” There are a number of excellent commentaries available, each with a particular focus. Some, such as Fitzmyer’s Anchor Bible commentary, focus on placing the Gospel into its historical context. Others, such as Johnson’s Sacra Pagina commentary, focus on placing the Gospel into its literary context and reading the Gospel and Acts as a continuous story. Both of them provide a wealth of information and insights that will give the preacher a deeper understanding of and appreciation for Luke’s story of Jesus.

Luke’s Gospel provides an appropriate followup to the recent Jubilee Year. Jesus’ mission was “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (4:19). His message focused on the themes of salvation and forgiveness. He preached this message from the cross: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (23:34). As Luke makes clear in Acts we are called to follow in Jesus’ footsteps as witnesses to these words and deeds of Jesus.

References


