

The welcome year of the Lord

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Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the welcome year of the Lord.”*

(Luke 4:14–18 [NRSV, alt.])

The welcome year of the Lord. Welcome. As Luke tells the story, this is the theme of Jesus’ entire ministry. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus opens his public ministry (4:14–30) with an inaugural address at the synagogue in his hometown, Nazareth, an address focusing prominently on this theme. And throughout his public ministry Jesus demonstrates the welcome year of the Lord in his interactions with people.

Welcome! It’s a heartwarming word, one we love to hear from others. It’s a comforting word, a safe word that lets us know we are at home, we are family, we are loved and cared for.

But for Jesus this word must mean more than home and safety and good feelings. By the end of the story in Luke 4, events have

taken a drastic turn. An angry lynch mob has grabbed Jesus, dragged him to the edge of a cliff, and nearly thrown him to his death. Such is the response to Jesus' proclamation of welcome.

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How can a word, an entire message of welcome, transform an admiring crowd into a lynch mob in the space of a moment? What does the word mean? And how can it be so dangerous?

One thing is clear. There is more to this word than first meets the eye. If welcome is the theme of Jesus' ministry, we need some major redefining of terms. The evidence is abundant. At every turn in Luke's Gospel, Jesus is getting himself into trouble with other folks, principally the ones with power and control. Jesus is continually pushing the

limits, scandalizing the upstanding members of the Jewish community, challenging the status quo, overturning social customs of the day, telling outrageous stories, and doing shocking deeds. And all, evidently, in the name of welcome.

So what is the welcome year of the Lord? And why does Jesus get into trouble for proclaiming it? A search through the Gospel of Luke yields a variety of clues.

Clue #1

The welcome year of the Lord is God's initiative. Welcome is, above all else, what God does for humans. This is God's agenda, God's project. It is the Spirit of the Lord who anoints Jesus for his ministry (4:18), and it is God's welcome that Jesus is sent to proclaim (4:19). A short time after his proclamation in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus announces the same thing to crowds near Capernaum who have come to find him and keep him from leaving: "I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose" (4:43). For Jesus and for those who hear him, welcome is above all God's doing.

One key word Luke uses throughout his Gospel to describe God's welcome is *forgiveness*. And, like welcome, forgiveness is a term primarily used to describe what God does for humans. Jesus'

words in the synagogue make this clear. “[The Spirit of the Lord] has sent me,” Jesus says, “to proclaim release [forgiveness] to the captives” (4:18). Forgiveness is God’s message for the human family. So in pronouncing forgiveness throughout his ministry, Jesus is in fact proclaiming God’s act of welcome toward humankind.

Three of Jesus’ stories in Luke 15 beautifully illustrate God’s welcome and forgiveness. Jesus tells about a shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep behind to go searching for one that got lost (15:4–7). He tells about a woman who meticulously sweeps her

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entire house to find a lost coin (15:8–10). And he tells about a father who goes to extraordinary lengths to extend a welcome to his two lost sons (15:11–32). These parables are all about God. God is the one who searches for what is lost, God is the one who rejoices in the finding, and God is the one who welcomes home a lost family member.

Welcome is indeed God’s act toward humankind. This message is good news. Surely none among Jesus’ listeners would have challenged him on this score. So if Jesus

had stopped with this message, he might not have gotten into trouble.

But we have more clues to consider.

Clue #2

The welcome year of the Lord is more than simply God’s initiative. *The welcome that God is offering to humankind is a welcome that comes through Jesus.* Jesus is God’s appointed agent on the ground to carry out God’s welcoming project. And the trouble starts here.

God’s welcome agenda is above all forgiveness. And Jesus in turn identifies forgiveness as a central piece of his own task. So Jesus goes around proclaiming forgiveness to folks. And every time he does, the result is major trouble.

The story of the paralyzed man whose friends bring him to Jesus (5:17–26) is a case in point. Before he heals the man, Jesus pronounces the forgiveness of his sins (5:20). And this act sets off

an immediate firestorm of protest from Jesus' opponents, the Pharisees: "Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (5:21). Jesus' opponents recognize, along with Jesus, that forgiveness comes from God. But what they don't recognize is that God has entrusted this task to Jesus.

The same thing happens when Jesus attends a banquet at the house of Simon the Pharisee (7:36–50). Here again Jesus announces the forgiveness of sins (7:47, 48).

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And here again Jesus' opponents challenge him with the words, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" (7:49).

The picture is clear on this point: If Jesus would leave the welcoming and forgiving task to God, he might get on just fine. But he doesn't. He can't, because proclaiming forgiveness is precisely what God has commissioned him to do. Welcome may be a good word. But it is not a safe word. For many who witness Jesus' ministry, the word

welcome, and the word *forgiveness* along with it, are blasphemous words. In the world of Jesus and his opponents, blasphemy is a serious charge, with serious consequences. And if Jesus keeps doing blasphemous things, forgiving sins on God's behalf, Jesus may well have to live with—or die by—those consequences.

The picture is getting more complex, and more dangerous. But we have more clues to examine.

Clue #3

Jesus may already be in big trouble as he makes his way throughout the countryside proclaiming the forgiveness of sins. In the eyes of Jesus' opponents, what comes next is even worse. Not only does Jesus act with unbelievable audacity by pronouncing forgiveness of sins in God's place, but his personal life adds insult to injury and a note of scandal to the whole welcoming project.

Luke's Gospel has no more persistent and no more vivid motif than that of Jesus' scandalous social habits and his disreputable social companions. To begin with, Jesus is a confirmed and self-acknowledged party-goer, with the reputation of "a glutton and a drunkard" (7:34). But it's not just the parties that get Jesus into

trouble. It's the people Jesus parties with. Most of them are folks with bad reputations, people to be avoided at all costs. If Jesus is notorious as a glutton and a drunkard, he also gets in trouble for being "a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (7:34).

Take the woman who crashes Simon's party and makes an uninvited and unseemly appearance, exhibiting inappropriate emotions in public and letting her hair down in front of a group of men (7:36–50). Simon the Pharisee knows this woman is a sinner, a woman whose touch is to be strictly avoided. But Jesus allows her to complete her scandalous anointing service. And he even commends her for her actions and pronounces the forgiveness of her sins!

Then we note Jesus' frequent party companions, the tax collectors, those despicable and dishonest collaborators who betray their compatriots by collecting taxes for the enemy, the Roman occupiers. Worse, they skim a handy living off the top to line their own pockets, even as they reduce their neighbors to abject poverty. One can find nothing good to say about these folks. And yet Jesus joins Levi and his crowd for a

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banquet (5:27–32) and invites himself to the house of Zacchaeus (19:1–10). And the entire community of tax collectors and sinners gathers around Jesus to listen to his teachings (15:1). This is clearly scandalous in the eyes of Jesus' opponents. "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" (5:30), they ask on one occasion. Another time they complain, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them!" (15:2). And if that were not enough, Jesus tells a story in which he commends the righteousness of a tax collector over that of a Pharisee

(18:9–14). Outrageous is hardly too strong a word for this kind of social behavior. Jesus has gotten his reputation the old-fashioned way: he has earned it, fair and square.

Jesus makes no apologies for his scandalous behavior and his disreputable companions. In fact, as he explains it, this

behavior is the essence of welcome. *Jesus' radical and scandalous solidarity with sinners lies at the heart of his ministry.* In Jesus' words, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance" (5:31–32). And showing solidarity with sinners is what it takes to do so. It's that simple.

This is not yet the end of the matter. The scandal increases.

Clue #4

It is bad enough that Jesus goes partying with the scum of Jewish society. But then he takes things one step further and reaches out to foreigners, the people beyond the Jewish community, the

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enemies. And this is what nearly costs him his life before he even gets started with his ministry.

It all goes back to that scene in the synagogue at Nazareth (4:14–30). Jesus' neighbors and townspeople gathered at the synagogue are all ready to receive him with open arms as the hometown boy made good. And then Jesus makes a near-fatal blunder in his sermon: "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.' ...Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the

truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha. And none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian" (4:23–27).

Jesus' hometown folks are happy enough to see him come back, and they would love to see him do great things in their midst. But Jesus' ministry, he tells them, is not just for the homefolks. My ministry, Jesus says in effect, is for all people, and yes, that includes even those people from beyond our borders,

even our enemies. It's when Jesus' townspeople hear this that the lynch mob takes shape. Clearly these good folks of Nazareth are deeply threatened by good news that is for everyone and not just for the hometown folks or the Jewish people. Welcome is not merely a blasphemous word or a scandalous reality. Now welcome appears to be unpatriotic as well.

This is the character of the good news. The good news that Jesus has come to proclaim and the healing and forgiveness that Jesus has come to bring are a gift not merely to the Jewish people, to the hometown and the home country. *This good news, this healing, this forgiveness is a gift to all people, regardless of their hometown or their country of origin. It is for all people, whether they are friends or enemies.* Jesus' words only a short time later make this clear: "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (6:27–28). Jesus' townspeople have not mistaken his meaning. It is hardly surprising that they rise up on the spot and escort him to the nearest cliff. Welcome has become a dangerous word! Jesus should know better!

But the matter does not end here. Now the clues begin to involve Jesus' disciples and his listeners as well.

Clue #5

Welcome may well be, before and above all else, God's act toward humankind. *But God's welcome, the welcome proclaimed and acted out by Jesus in his ministry, calls for response, human response, the response that Jesus calls repentance.* And repentance is a costly response, one that is not cheap or easy.

Repentance is first of all the call to profound humility and absolute honesty before God. Peter's words in the face of the holy are, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" (5:8). The young man who has publicly shamed his father and recklessly thrown away his own life returns home to say, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you" (15:18, 21). And the tax collector that Jesus tells of in his parable stands with his face to the ground and cries out, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (18:13). Such transparency and such confession don't come without effort. And the road back home, the road to such radical honesty before God, is surely not easy.

Repentance involves something more. Beyond honesty and confession to God is the call to make things right on the human level, the call to put righteousness (justice) into practice. This response can be costly, in more ways than one. Take, for one example, the case of Zacchaeus, that richest of all rich tax

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collectors, that short man who lived in Jericho and wanted a look at Jesus when he came through town. The desire to see Jesus cost Zacchaeus dearly: "Look! Half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much" (19:8). This is how Zacchaeus responds to the welcome Jesus extended him.

The flip side of God's welcome agenda, then, is the call for humans to extend God's welcome to others by making right what has been wrong and by acting out the

extravagant grace of God in tangible ways. This is welcome as viewed from the human perspective. It is a profoundly challenging call. Why else does that other rich man, the one who wants to inherit eternal life, turn Jesus down when Jesus offers him the answer to his quest (18:18–25)? Living out God's welcome agenda in human relationships is the call to discipleship of the most courageous and costly character.

But we have one final clue.

Clue #6

God's welcome project all comes down to the big celebration! As Luke tells the story, in Jesus' world celebrations and festive meals are always going on. And Jesus is always in the middle of them (5:27–32; 7:36–50; 10:38–42; 14:1–6; 19:1–10). If Jesus is not at a party, he's telling folks about one (14:15–24; 15:11–32). For Jesus this is the meaning of welcome: the big party God is throwing for humankind. At this celebration God welcomes home the one who has been lost and is now found, God kills the fatted calf, God leads the guests into singing, dancing, and uninhibited rejoicing over the return of the lost child (15:11–32). This image sums up what God wants to do with all people everywhere.

Welcome! It is a word filled with challenge and danger, a call to a life beyond imagination, an invitation to a rich and extravagant celebration. Welcome! And let the party go on!

About the author

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