

Preaching Eschatology in an Age Agnostic About the Future

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Advent seems to offer preachers prime time for dealing with the future. In celebrating the coming of the Messiah, Christians have traditionally also been invited to celebrate the Second Coming, an ultimate future when the cosmos will be transparent to the purpose of God.

Yet the future most frequently celebrated in Advent is, in reality, the past. Advent is the time in which we think ourselves and our congregations into a past that is more remote than the incarnation. From that more remote past, we have the sense of looking to the future when the focus falls upon Jesus. Yet by all historical reckoning, Jesus is a past figure, especially in his birth. How is it that we gain a sense of dealing with the future when we in actual fact deal only with this particular figure out of the past?

In part it is because the past (which was once future) has implications for every future. The incarnation anticipated in Advent and celebrated at Christmas addresses all time, including all future time. Yet we do not readily allow it that scope. What we often do with that incarnation is to let it address all time, *up to and including our present*. The "relevance" of Advent and Christmas is stated in terms of the promise the incarnation holds for our time with its vicissitudes and challenges. The future we thus celebrate is actually our present. We think of it as pertaining to the future only because it is future with reference to the historical event of the incarnation. Still, from the perspective of *our* actual location in time, it is merely the present.

Thus our celebrations of Advent and Christmas regularly and properly relate to both past and present. But the bearing they have on the future is perhaps the most understated aspect of the season. The fullness of the season can scarcely be grasped exhaustively by reference to past and present. The season includes not only the narration of the history in which prophetic hopes were realized in New Testament nativities, nor only the discernment of how that wonderful realization bears on the dilemmas (large and small) of our particular era. The season also probes the unfathomed future in terms of the incarnation. Christ's coming and Second Coming are inextricably bound together. Until we deal with the latter as well as the former, we have not celebrated the full mystery and wonder of Advent and Christmas.

I

But it is more than a matter of doing justice to the Christmas mystery. It is also a matter of doing justice to the world we have inherited. Apart from

some powerful sense of what the future holds, it is unlikely that adequate resolve or imagination can be marshalled for living into the future. Things that may foreclose the future loom ominously on the horizon: nuclear holocaust and environmental collapse. Transcending their immobilizing impact is a key to "living into the future." For they tend to produce a cynicism and despair which inclines to long term fatalism and short term hedonism. Preaching for Advent and Christmas which probes the mystery of the ultimate future will have helpful effects on the quality of our present efforts to contend with that future.

However, our age scarcely seems to invite such preaching. There appears to be a pervasive agnosticism toward the future in modern culture which multiplies attempts to proclaim the mystery of God's providence and grace with reference to what is yet to come. To reclaim such proclamation for Advent (and for any time) requires that we understand the inhibiting forces with which we contend.

Perhaps the simplest—and most fundamental—factor to cite in explaining the agnosticism of our age is the fear of death. Whether we think personally about our fear concerning our very own death, or globally about the death of the human species through a nuclear war or a decadent environment, the prospects play in modern consciousness in a way that make us hurry past any occasions which bring them into focus.

A derivative factor is the fear of personal misfortune. While certainly more pedestrian and less definitive, the fears of personal adversity that easily crowd into the most innocent contemplation of the future condition us against the very endeavor. To think about what one's home will be like in ten years could conjure visions of such sugar plums as vastly increased equity, but it might also produce nightmares about too much deferred maintenance or other homeowner headaches. To think about what kind of young adults one's school aged children will be can lead to cheery scenarios of their move into adulthood, but it may also induce anxiety about the social, physical, and spiritual perils which lie along the path. These fears of personal misfortune have broader social instances as well, as when a whole society is unwilling to look beyond the prosperity of its own present because of the lurking suspicion that a darker economic age is on the horizon.

It is natural to wonder what counter assertion even authentic Christian preaching can bring to these factors which promote agnosticism regarding the future. There is a venerable catalog of Christian claims which contend with the fear of death, but none of them can deny the stark reality of death itself. And despite the bland assumptions of some versions of contemporary Christianity, there is really nothing which forecloses the possibility that the human species could effectively destroy itself by either or both of the means identified already. Much less can Christian preaching provide guarantees that the future will be void of personal misfortune, neo-charismatic claims to the contrary notwithstanding. Preaching eschatology cannot happen with integrity on the assumption that the anxieties which make it difficult are baseless.

Eschatological proclamation can do no better (nor less) than begin with the vision of Romans 8:19-22 in which the whole creation is the frame of

reference. This vision opens the door to thinking about the future not merely from the narrow, anthropocentric imaginings which are embedded both in the fear of death and the fear of personal misfortune. It invites a contemplation of the future in terms of creation as a whole, avoiding the narrowness (and eventual triviality) of the fears which so easily draw us back from serious reckoning with the future.

Nowhere does the anthropocentrism of much of our modern theological perspective become so evident as in our dealings with the future. By anthropocentrism I do not mean images of God drawn from human experience. Instead I mean images of God's dealing with the world which assume that the human species is the final goal and purpose of God's dealing. Ironically, this very assumption is what sponsors our modern agnosticism about the future. For our fears all focus on the human plight, whether our own personal prospects or those of the species as a whole. Romans 8:19-22 reminds us that either perspective is too narrow. It claims that the larger issue is what is happening in the creation as a whole. The future about which it expresses fundamental confidence is that "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay" (v.21). All our fears obviously have to be taken into account. But just as obviously they are the smaller part of the puzzle. The promise about the future does not begin with either *our* individual or collective destinies. It begins with creation itself. Starting with ourselves has brought us to a dead end in preaching eschatology. Now at the end of a road which leads nowhere we notice that scripture itself gives a new starting place. If we can take this alternative seriously, we may have some prospect of preaching a meaningful eschatology even in an age agnostic about the future.

II

Proclamation which addresses the future of the creation as a whole will necessarily have to enter into conversation with science and cosmology. Claims about the future must be informed by scientific investigations into the realities and prospects of life in the universe. And it must be in dialogue with those keen minds who have been highly informed by modern science and who also seek to discern the place of life in the universe.

Preachers may do well to spend some of their reading time with Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* and Freeman Dyson's *Infinite In All Directions*. Two of the most prominent physicists in the world today have ventured into the realm of cosmology, seeking to comprehend the place of life in the universe on the basis of the unfolding mystery which modern scientific understanding brings. Much to the preacher's benefit, they have tried to write in a nontechnical manner for a general audience. If on theological grounds we have reason to approach proclamation about the future with a focus on "creation itself," we will find much of that creation and its prospects described in their work.

Dyson's portrait of life in the universe is one which is particularly fruitful, though it has not had the media attention of Hawking's work. It is concerned with the largest and most comprehensive question about how and whether life

might endure in the universe. It is noteworthy that while "life" entails some of the definitive qualities of the human species, such as mind and communication, Dyson's reflections do not assume that the life whose future prospects he analyzes will necessarily be the form of life we have come to assume is the "highest" form. It is also noteworthy that the "creation" which he has in view is indeed the *whole* creation. To think about the future of life in the universe, we are required in Dyson's view to think not only about its terrestrial, but also about its extraterrestrial, possibilities. Far from assuming that "life" with the quality of consciousness and mind already exists elsewhere in the universe, Dyson considers what it may take for terrestrial life to continue its evolution elsewhere—in space and on other celestial bodies.

On scientific grounds he argues that it is conceivable that life will find a way to adapt to the critical problems of zero gravity, zero temperature, and zero pressure. He even believes that life can survive the ultimate disappearance of matter predicted by some theoretical physicists with the dissolution of the nuclei of atoms. Flesh and blood may not be the only vehicle for thought according to Dyson.

The critical question for the truly long-term future is whether the universe is finite and closed or infinite and open. If the former, as implied in the view of the universe having begun with a Big Bang, then an inexorable collapse of the universe is likely, "a universal collapse into heat-death, with the sky growing hotter and hotter until it finally falls in on us and carries us into a space-time singularity at infinite temperature. . . . If, on the other hand, we live in an open universe, infinite in space and time and continuing to expand into a future without end, then life has to face a prospect of slow freezing rather than quick frying" (*Infinite in All Directions*, p. 110). Dyson's claim is that life can adapt itself over the long periods of time involved, matching its metabolism to constantly falling temperatures. Life can actually survive forever on a finite store of energy in such a universe. "The pulse of life will beat more slowly as the temperature falls, but it will never stop" (*Ibid.*, p. 111). On the basis of his scientific calculations respecting this expanding and cooling universe, Dyson believes that there is strong support for the optimistic assessment of life's potential. "No matter how far we go into the future, there will always be new things happening, new information coming in, new worlds to explore, a constantly expanding domain of life, consciousness and memory" (*Ibid.*, p. 115).

It is important to be aware of the time frame in which these prospects may come to pass. Dyson's poetic way of putting it cannot be improved upon: "Mind is patient. Mind has waited for three billion years on this planet before composing its first string quartet. It may have to wait for another three billion years before it spreads all over the galaxy (*Ibid.*, p. 118). The future which he thinks about is clearly the long-term future. The affirmation he makes is that it is conceivable that life will have a future in the universe which modern science discerns.

Such scientifically informed cosmology provides a framework in which preachers may usefully interpret Paul's proclamation that the "creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay." Despite the real threats to our planet which nuclear holocaust and environmental destruction pose, their very

occurrence would not necessarily give the lie to the theological point being made. The immense tragedy of so much of God's gracious and patient labor with our part of the cosmos coming to a dead end cannot be gainsaid. But neither would such human catastrophes finally thwart the purpose of God to create and sustain a universe of diversity, beauty, and life, "world without end." The ability to see a future even in the face of the ending implied by such powerfully destructive outcomes is the chief gift of Dyson's cosmology to the preacher. The perspective his vision offers is a long one, and the possibilities involved far surpass the unimaginative limitations of merely terrestrial speculation.

It may well be that the immobilizing effects coming from the vision of nuclear destruction or environmental collapse are precisely what Dyson's vision can help us overcome. When we grasp the notion that the glory of God's purpose of life in the universe is not finally dependent upon us, then our futile prospects for thwarting that purpose are exposed. When we learn with older Calvinists to cultivate a willingness to be damned for this glory of God, then many of the dynamics which make nuclear and ecological disaster likely may subside.

III

At the level of personal confidence in the future, the reflections of such scientists as Dyson are also helpful. They provide a framework in which the basic affirmations of faith may meaningfully and intelligibly be developed. The coming of Christ celebrated at Advent and Christmas orients us to a future expectation: that the grace and mercy manifest then will also be manifest in the future.

A recurrent image of Dyson's is that of the monarch butterfly. It appeals to him because of the mystery of the universe which seems to be present in the genetic structure of this tiny but beautiful creature. Accompanying the physical metamorphosis from caterpillar to butterfly is the even more astounding transfer of ability to deploy legs and wings and navigate from Massachusetts to Mexico. He believes there is a lesson in this mystery for all life, waiting to be learned. He is confident that it can and will be learned, and then can be used as life continues to deploy itself in the universe.

At the very end of his book he is drawn almost magnetically to an image which is found in Dante's *Purgatorio*, *Canto 10*:

O you proud Christians, wretched souls and small,
Who by the dim lights of your twisted minds
Believe you prosper even as you fall,
Can you not see that we are worms, each one
Born to become the angelic butterfly
That flies defenseless to the Judgment Throne?

Citing this passage, Dyson lets it stand as a poetic expression of his own faith that humankind is embarked on a continuing metamorphosis as it continues its "immense journey into the universe" (*Ibid.*, p. 298). But its citation draws us

back to some of the particularity of our Advent hope in the future.

As monarch butterflies embark on a proportionately immense journey, the fate of individual butterflies is mixed and varied. Some complete the migration all the way from Massachusetts to Mexico. Many meet an unhappy end in the nets of hobbyists adding to their collections, or on automobile grills of vacationers driving on their own journeys—oblivious to having ended the far grander journey of another creature. In either case the butterfly, in Dante's phrase, "flies defenseless to the Judgment Throne." If we think of our lives under the image of the butterfly, we are sobered by the very defenselessness of our flight. Dyson's vision offers assurance that the universe is hospitable to "life" continuing the flight forever. Advent and Christmas give the assurance that when we arrive "defenselessly" at whatever end turns out to be our very own, the same grace and mercy incarnate in Jesus occupies the judgment throne.