

Preaching in Advent

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Each year, as Christmas approaches, our churches echo with words of crisis. We are told of a time when "your God will come with vengeance," (Isa. 35:4), when "the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up" (II Pet. 3:10), and, when "with foreboding of what is coming on the world . . . they will see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory" (Luke. 21:26-27). Texts like these are explicitly eschatological, indeed, arguably apocalyptic. They are also typical of those appointed by the Common Lectionary for the Sundays in Advent.¹

For example, all the Gospel lections for Advent I focus on the second coming of Jesus Christ, a theme reinforced by the respective epistle readings.² In this way, Advent I serves as an apocalyptic climax to the eschatological emphases in the texts selected for the final Sundays after Pentecost. In Advent II and III, the Gospel readings all turn to John the Baptist, that ascetic emissary of the kingdom.³

Two-thirds of the Old Testament lessons for Advent I, II, and III are drawn from the Book of Isaiah in accordance with venerable tradition. Significantly, of these, another two-thirds come from sections of Isaiah that Paul D. Hanson argues are either "proto" or "early" apocalyptic.⁴

The apocalyptic flavor of these Advent texts would not have shocked our Christian forebears. Thomas J. Talley has recently marshaled evidence to suggest how the expectation of the Messiah, a mainstay of the primitive Christian Pascha, was transferred to the season of Advent. This thematic transfer may have happened by sheer force of a connotation. Reference to the incarnation as the Lord's *parousia* (of which *adventus* = "coming" is the usual Latin translation) continued to carry the term's more ancient scriptural meaning of the Lord's *second* coming.⁵

Advent's ability to attract explicitly apocalyptic associations may also derive from its overlapping with a series of earlier Roman festivals which concluded the agricultural year. In this connection, nine December sermons of Leo I (d. 461) not only offer thanksgivings for the gathered harvest, but reflections on "the end of the world" as well. The consummation of the year, therefore, occasions homiletical treatment of the consummation of the ages. In fact, nowhere in these sermons does Leo even mention the coming of Christmas!⁶

In this regard, we should also bear in mind that it was the Middle Ages that thematized death, judgment, heaven, and hell as the four "last things." Traditionally, each of these themes successively furnished the preacher's topic for the four Sundays in Advent. That medieval Christians heard homilies on hell is not surprising. That they heard them on the Sunday before Christmas points to an astonishing apocalyptic intensity, especially when compared to today's tepid tone.⁷

Of course, our American cultural context hardly encourages a disciplined Advent shaped by apocalyptic eschatology. Like everyone else, today's Christians busy themselves in Advent with feasting, parties, and gift-giving that once characterized the "Twelve Days" following Christmas. However lamentable liturgically, this conversion of Advent into Christmastide, or, even Saturnalia, appears commercially cemented in our consumer society. The contradiction between the church's faltering attempt to recover Advent and the culture's roaring success in capitalizing on Christmas usually appears in the annual complaint over parish music. Why are the beloved carols (played in K-Mart and throughout the shopping mall) postponed in church for those somber hymns so out of tune with the Christmas season?

Apart from this usually manageable pastoral difficulty, are the acute theological ones raised by apocalyptic eschatology itself. Thumbing through the Advent lessons, preachers are likely to find the stuff of hair-raising predictions, outmoded ways of thinking, and ethical irresponsibility in the here and now. Such texts seem only primed to fuel our congregation's "crazies," insult our more staid or sophisticated members, and mute our own clarions for liberation in a real world of intolerable injustices. Preachers loyal to the common Lectionary during Advent must reckon with objections such as these.

Fortunately, those confronted by the specter of an apocalyptic Advent are not bereft of scholarly support. Since the Vietnam War, and no doubt partially hastened by its horrors, countless studies on all aspects of apocalypticism have appeared. In the compasses of this essay, it is not my intention to provide either an overview or an inventory of this significant research. Rather, I want to call attention to the language of future expectation. By drawing on the work of Frederick A. Kreuziger, I aim to suggest how the language of "disjunctive expectation" can enlarge and enliven our preaching in Advent.

Virtually all of the Advent lessons employ the language of future expectation. In his *Apocalypse and Science Fiction*, Kreuziger develops a threefold typology by which to understand how such languages function.⁸ As such, his study provides a helpful orientation for preachers struggling to find their bearings to Advent.

The first language of future expectation discussed by Kreuziger is one he terms "simple expectation." The rhetoric of simple expectation predicts and describes the future on the basis of present trends or dreams. The guiding assumption here is that the future is only another name for the prolongation of the present. The future brings nothing radically new or completely unexpected. All that is going to happen unfolds from what is already given.⁹

We encounter this language every day in weather forecasts, environmental impact statements, and economic predictions. This is the lingo of the planner, the think tank, and the futurologist. This is *Life* magazine announcing authoritatively that by the year 2000 half of all new American homes will be "substantially computerized," and that eyeglasses, typewriters, and the local postman will be no more.¹⁰ By analyzing present patterns and trends, we can report in advance what the future will bring.

The language of simple expectation accords no real prominence to historical memory. The past is irrelevant. Since the future is understood as the

projection of present trends, simple expectation—for all its talk of the future—really defies the present and lives under its tyranny. Thus, it eliminates any hope for the future, other than whatever measures we can now take to control it. Indeed, motivating this rhetoric is the desire to “take charge” of the future. The future is present as a datum that we can know, and, therefore, control with some honest effort.¹¹

As Kreuziger notes, apocalyptic eschatology is often regarded or interpreted as the language of simple expectation.¹² Here the preacher may think of a “fundamentalist” parishioner or colleague who reads Advent’s “signs of the times” as evident data by which to calculate coming events. Yet, ironically, even classic liberals like Fosdick can turn apocalyptic eschatology into simple expectation. Indeed, for consistent evolutionists, even of the providential sort, there really is no other way to regard the future. Therefore, Fosdick “translates” or “decodes” the “imminence” of apocalyptic into the “immanence” of progress. In this way, the modern preacher can still use the texts of Advent as a way of exhorting Christians “to strive for the better organization of society that the divine purpose may be furthered, not hindered, by our economic and political life.”¹³ That is to say, whereas the fundamentalist aims to *predict* what will happen, the liberal aims to *control* what will happen. Both proceed by assimilating apocalyptic language into that of simple expectation. In so doing, both approaches fail to recognize the promissory character of apocalyptic eschatology.

By contrast, Kreuziger argues that promise actually gives rise to two languages of expectation: “modified expectation” typical of prophetic eschatology, and “disjunctive expectation” characteristic of apocalyptic eschatology. Recalling promise, an exercise of memory, posits a past; hoping in promise, an exercise of anticipation, opens up the future. Promise, therefore, mediates “the past into the present (through memory), and the present into the future (through hope).” In this way, promise subverts the all-controlling power of the present over the future. Thus, “it is promise which allows us to know future as more than a simple mechanical extension of the present.” It is promise which modifies simple expectation.¹⁴

If simple expectation speaks of the future by extrapolating present trends, modified expectation does so by pointing to the present fulfillment of promise. The language of modified expectation is thus the language of historical communities constituted by promise. We hear it in the claims of Jewish settlements on the occupied West Bank: The modern State of Israel is the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham. We hear it in the Reagan-style rhetoric of American civil religion: Our shining city on the hill confirms the promise of the new world. We hear it in the preaching of Protestant liberalism, to the degree that it modifies its doctrine of progress by the word of biblical promise. Even David G. Buttrick, who clearly acknowledges the apocalyptic character of the gospel, cannot resist the language of modified expectation when he asks, “even in our muddled world can we not sense that God is beginning to draw the plot lines of the human story toward a denouement (a denouement the Bible depicts as a Holy City in which nations and races will be reconciled)?”¹⁵

The problem, of course, with confirming God's promise by appeals to present experience or circumstances, is that there are, for example, any numbers of faithful whose circumstances are so appalling that they cannot see or "sense" any evidence that God is drawing plot lines together! The question Advent poses is whether there is a gospel for persons and circumstances like these. How do we continue to preach and expect the promise when the present proves stubbornly resistant to its fulfillment?

In other words, a crisis is bound to occur for a historical community whenever the validity of its promise is tied exclusively to its fulfillment in history. True, the community can adopt the strategy of reinterpreting the promise so that it escapes falsification by history, but this approach jeopardizes the integrity of promise itself, and thereby threatens to deprive the community of hope.¹⁶

In Kreuziger's analysis, this situation gives rise to the language of "disjunctive expectation," so-called because it refuses to "conjoin" promise and future in terms of present fulfillment. In other words, what is distinctive about this language of expectation, characteristic of apocalyptic eschatology, is *its refusal to make fulfillment the ultimate test of the validity of promise*. In this way, apocalyptic rhetoric continues to keep promise alive *in the present* by its "indifference to disconfirmation." The subversion of the status quo by the power of a community's promise goes on, even when present circumstances offer no evidence whatsoever that fulfillment is in hand. Apocalyptic rhetoric, therefore, is not the rhetoric of disillusionment, but the rhetoric of "hope against hope" (Rom. 4:18), or the "negation of negation." The language of disjunctive expectation forsakes the disillusionment that inevitably results when present circumstances are called forth to confirm the promise of God.¹⁷

Where do we hear this apocalyptic language?

We hear it in situations that by any standards of this age are most unpromising, have no remedy, or yield no answer. We hear this rhetoric on cancer wards, in jail cells, at funeral services. We hear it in the spirituals of an enslaved people, and in the sermons of Martin Luther King, Jr. And we hear it in Advent: No matter how grim things get ("distress of nations in perplexity," "fainting with fear and with foreboding"), God's promise stands! Apocalyptic language is the rhetoric of "nevertheless."

What do these reflections on the language of future expectation suggest for preaching in Advent?

As the language of disjunctive expectation, apocalyptic eschatology frees the preacher from the rhetoric of fulfillment. This does not mean that the gospel flees from the here and now. Rather, the language of disjunctive expectation transposes "fulfillment," from the realization of the promise in the present, to the recognition of the presence of the promise in the life of the community. That is to say, the very fact that the promise is present, amid adversity and opposition, is all the "validation" it needs.¹⁸

By freeing us from the rhetoric of fulfillment, the language of apocalyptic eschatology enables us to face all that opposes the gospel. Advent preaching resists the culture's "season to be jolly," if this is understood as a Saturnalia anesthetizing Christians to sin, death, and hell. This is not a matter of "Bah!

Humbug!" but faith's refusal either to sentimentalize promise or to trivialize suffering by forced fulfillment.

By freeing us from the rhetoric of extrapolatory expectation, the language of apocalyptic eschatology also frees us from so many tired (if Titanic) homiletical clichés based on our desire to take charge of the future. We have heard and preached too many sermons on "preparing for Christmas," "bringing peace on earth," and, yes, "building the kingdom." The message of Advent is precisely that *we* cannot do these things: They are "the mighty works of God."¹⁹ Only the proclamation of the Messiah's coming, and not our drive to control, keeps the present pliable to the power of promise.²⁰

This freedom from both the rhetoric of fulfillment and the rhetoric of control is attested in a reply Bishop Desmond Tutu recently made to Ted Koppel on "Nightline." When asked if the situation in South Africa were hopeless, Tutu replied, "Of course it is hopeless from a human point of view. But we believe in the resurrection, and so we are prisoners of hope."

Likewise, preaching in Advent does not seek either to prove or predict that "things are getting better" (or, worse, for that matter!). Preaching in Advent does not set out to confirm God's promises by feeding our fantasies for fulfillment or dreams of controlling the future. Preaching in Advent is to speak in solidarity with "the sufferings of this present time" (Rom. 8:18), and, to discern "in, with, and under" those sufferings the promise of the coming Christ.

NOTES

¹ Peter C. Bower, ed., *Handbook for the Common Lectionary* (Philadelphia: The Geneva Press, 1987).

² Gospels: Matt 24:36-44 (A), Mark 13:32-37 (B), Luke 21:25-36 (C). Epistles: Rom 13:11-14 (A), I Cor 13:9 (B), I Thess 3:9-13 (C). By contrast, the Gospel lessons selected for Advent IV, namely, Matt 1:18-25 (A), Luke 1:26-38 (B), and Luke 1:39-55 (C), reflect the lectionary's de facto transference of the Feast of the Annunciation (originally March 25) to the Sunday before Christmas. For the historical antecedents of this "reform," see Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1986), 152-154. This has had the effect of transforming the Fourth Sunday in Advent into a kind of "Christmas Sunday" that no longer retains the apocalyptic tone of the other three.

³ Matt 3:1-12 (II-A), Matt 11:2-11 (III-A), Mark 1:1-8 (II-B), John 1:6-8, 19-28 (III-B), Luke 3:1-6 (II-C), and Luke 3:7-18 (III-C).

⁴ Isa 35:1-10 (III-A), Isa 40:1-11 (II-B), Isa 61:1-4, 8-11 (III-B), Isa 63:16-64:8 (I-B). See *Old Testament Apocalyptic* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), p. 36, and also p. 37 where Hanson assigns Mal 3:1-4 (II-C) to "early" apocalyptic. See also, Paul D. Hanson, "Old Testament Apocalyptic Reexamined," in Paul D. Hanson, ed., *Visionaries and Their Apocalypses*, *Issues in Religion and Theology*, no. 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, London: SPCK, 1983), 46-51.

⁵ Talley, *Liturgical Year*, 79-80.

⁶ Talley, *Liturgical Year*, 149-150.

⁷ Richard A. Norris revived the medieval homiletical practice in his homilies for four Sundays in Advent, "The Last Things," preached at St. Ignatius Episcopal Church, New York, December 1978.

⁸ Frederick A. Kreuziger, *Apocalypse and Science Fiction: A Dialectic of Religious and Secular Soteriologies*, *American Academy of Religion Academy Series*, no. 40 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), esp. 137-185.

⁹ Kreuziger, *Apocalypse*, 164-65.

¹⁰ *Life* (February 1989), 62.

¹¹ Kreuziger, *Apocalypse*, 166-68.

¹² Kreuziger, *Apocalypse*, 168.

¹³ Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Modern Use of the Bible* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1924), 110.

¹⁴ Kreuziger, *Apocalypse*, 169-170. For a more extensive analysis of the function "promissory narration," see Christopher Morse, *The Logic of Promise in Moltmann's Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), and more recently his essay "God's Promise as Presence," in Frederick B. Burham, Charles S. McCoy, and M. Douglas Meeks, eds., *Love: the Foundation of Hope, The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann and Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 143-157.

¹⁵ David G. Buttrick, *Preaching Jesus Christ: An Exercise in Homiletic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 67 Cf. 73.

¹⁶ Kreuziger, *Apocalypse*, 173-77.

¹⁷ Kreuziger, *Apocalypse*, 173-81. Kreuziger's analysis of the advent of the language of disjunctive expectation parallels Paul D. Hanson's discussion of the "dawn of apocalyptic." The whole Deuteronomist axiom that if Israel is faithful to the Jerusalem cult, God will bring the age of glory (II Kings. 23:25) comes crashing down with the death of King Josiah, the destruction of the Temple, and the exile. History fails faithfulness. In II Isaiah, we see a reinterpretation of Israel's promise within a larger cosmic context that relativizes the negativities of the present situation: Yahweh gives Israel to her spoilers (42:24-25) to prepare Israel for a more glorious destiny (43:18-21; (46:12-13; 49:14-23; 52:7-10). When even this promise of II Isaiah fails to fulfill, the crisis occurs that precipitates the early apocalyptic eschatology of Isaiah 56-66. Instead of the glorious restoration of Israel, Jerusalem becomes a Persian vassal. The collaborating Zadokite establishment is perceived as corrupt, apostate, and without the capacity for repentance. For III Isaiah, only a further act of divine judgment, and nothing that humans can initiate or achieve, will purify and restore Israel. Nevertheless, this vision, unlike those of classical prophecy, is not expressed in terms of history. "Prophetic eschatology is transformed into apocalyptic at the point where the task of translating cosmic vision into the categories of mundane reality is abdicated." See "Apocalyptic Re-examined," 42-49.

¹⁸ Kreuziger, *Apocalypse*, 178-79.

¹⁹ "But in the narrative structure of apocalyptic it is significant that what is expected is never human in origin, in choice, or in resolution. It devolves from the mighty works of God. What is determined, therefore, is never humankind's response: the present always remains open to the radically new." Kreuziger, *Apocalypse*, 183-84.

²⁰ In this regard, see Paul Lehmann's distinction between "political messianism" and "messianic politics." *The Transfiguration of Politics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 91.