

Preaching on Psalms for Advent

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In talking about the Psalms with pastors and seminary students, I have found that they are frequently surprised to hear me say that the Psalms should be preached. They either assume or have been taught that since the Psalms originated primarily as liturgical materials, they should continue to be used that way — as calls to worship, hymns, and prayers. Even the Psalter reading after the Old Testament lesson is usually called a “gradual,” which means a *response* to provide a transition to the New Testament lessons. What this point of view overlooks is the canonical process which led to the final form of the Book of Psalms. As Brevard Childs puts it:

I would argue that the need for taking seriously the canonical form of the Psalter would greatly aid in making use of the psalms in the life of the Christian Church. Such a move would not disregard the historical dimensions of the Psalter, but would attempt to profit from the shaping which the final redactors gave the older material to transform traditional poetry into Sacred Scripture for the later generations of the faithful.¹

In short, while the Psalms originated as human words to God and may still be used as such, they have been appropriated by the Church as God’s word to humans. The Psalms are meant to be preached!

According to Gerald H. Wilson, the “editorial ‘center’ of the final form of the Hebrew Psalter” is Book IV (Psalms 90-106).² It is dominated by a collection of enthronement psalms, all of which address God as king or affirm that God reigns (Pss. 93:1, 95:3, 96:10, 97:1, 98:6, 99:1). Thus, the central affirmation of the Psalter is that God rules the world, a message also proclaimed and embodied by Jesus (see Mark 1:14-15). Both the psalmists and the evangelists understood this message eschatologically — that is, as both a present reality and as a reality yet to be consummated. The fundamental message of the Psalms and its eschatological character make the Psalms particularly appropriate for preaching during Advent, a season which focuses our attention on eschatology. Advent is both a time to prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus (see Matt. 1:18-23, the Gospel lesson for Advent 4) and to anticipate Jesus’ second coming (see Matt. 24:36-44, the Gospel lesson for Advent 1). Advent puts us in a position of celebrating and waiting simultaneously. So do the Psalms; and preaching on the Psalms for Advent will articulate “the dialectical tension of *maranatha*,” which can be construed either as “Come, our Lord” or “Our Lord has come.”³ Psalm 146 (Advent 3) is a song of praise which celebrates God’s reign (see v. 10), while Psalm 80 (Advent 4) is a prayer by those who are waiting for God’s reign to be more fully manifest. Psalms 122 (Advent 1) and 72 (Advent 2) are also related to the proclamation of God’s reign, which in the Old Testament is especially manifest at a particular place, Jerusalem (Psalm 122), and through a particular person, the king/messiah (Psalm 72). The following discussions of each psalm will suggest ideas and directions for preaching them during Advent 1992.

Psalm 122 (Advent 1)

Psalm 122 is one of the Songs of Ascent (Psalms 120-134) and probably

originated as a song for pilgrims on the journey to Jerusalem. Structure and repetition focus attention on two essential features of the city: “the house of David” occupies a central position in the poem (v. 5), but it is encompassed by two references to “the house of the Lord” (vv. 1, 9). This structure suggests a theological conclusion: David’s reign is but an agency of God’s reign, and the purpose of the Davidic administration is to enact the fundamental purpose of God’s rule — justice (v. 5; NRSV “judgment”). That justice is at the heart of God’s will for the world is suggested by the psalms which celebrate God’s reign (see “justice” or “judge”/ “judgment” in Pss. 96:10, 13, 13; 97:2, 8; 98:9, 9; 99:4, 4; see also Ps. 82:1, 2, 3, 8).

Another word used to describe God’s purpose for the world is *shalom*, “peace.” God’s reign means peace for God’s people (Ps. 29:10-11), and the king/messiah is to enact peace (Ps. 72:3, 7; NRSV “prosperity” in v. 3). *Shalom* becomes the key word in Ps. 122:6-8. The necessity to “pray for the peace of Jerusalem” (v. 6) is an implicit recognition of Jerusalem’s turmoil, and this conclusion is reinforced by the literary context (see v. 7 of Psalm 120, which opens the Songs of Ascent). In this context, the psalmist’s prayer and her resolve to “seek your [Jerusalem’s] good” (v. 9) amount to her recognition of God’s reign and her commitment to live under God’s rule. This commitment is not mere wishful thinking; it is eschatological. For the psalmist, to enter Jerusalem really does mean to enter a new world. The joy is real (v. 1). To live for God’s sake (v. 9) and for the sake of others (v. 8) is to experience, embody, and extend the justice which God intends for the world. To be sure, the same old, so-called realities are still present — hatred and war (see Ps. 120:7), turmoil and trouble — but they are no longer determinative.

What it means to enter Jerusalem, to live eschatologically, to live under God’s reign, is illustrated powerfully by one of Walker Percy’s characters in *The Second Coming*. Will Barrett’s father committed suicide when Will was a young man; and Will’s own life has been a persistent battle with a voice inside him that tells him to do the same. The voice knows what the world is like:

Come, what else is there [except suicide]? What other end if you don’t make the end? Make your own bright end in this dying world, this foul and feckless place, where you know as well as I that nothing ever really works, that you were never once yourself and never will be or he himself or she herself and certainly never once we ourselves together. Come, close it out before it closes you out because believe me life does no better job with dying than with living. Close it out. At least you can do that, not only lose but win, with one last splendid gesture defeat the whole foul feckless world.⁴

Will’s answer to the voice is a simple, “No,” based upon the experience of genuine love between himself and another human being, which he takes as a sign that “the Lord is here.”⁵

What the psalmist experienced in Jerusalem was a sign that “the Lord is here,” amid the dark daily realities of a dying world where nothing ever works out completely right and we are never all that we can be. Percy does not take the story of Will Barrett beyond his discovery of the sign, but the reader assumes that Will discontinues his frantic search for the second coming of Christ and begins to live in the new world created by the good news that “the Lord is here.”

That good news is the fundamental message of Psalm 122. Advent’s dual focus on Christ’s first and second comings means that, like the psalmist, we pray for peace

even as we celebrate the peace we now know because “the Lord is here.” To be sure, our experience as Christians differs from that of the psalmist, whose experience was tied to Jerusalem. But what Jerusalem represented for the psalmist, the locus of God’s presence and power on earth, is represented for us by Jesus (see Matt. 24:1-2, the larger context of the Gospel lesson for Advent 1, which suggests Jesus has replaced the temple; see also Mark 14:58, 15:29; John 2:19). In Elie Wiesel’s *A Beggar in Jerusalem*, it is said of Jerusalem that “no one can enter it and go away unchanged.”⁶ So we say, in effect, of Jesus: no one can be “in Christ” and go away unchanged. So during Advent and all seasons, we simultaneously await, experience, proclaim, and work for the justice and peace which God intends for the world. For us and for the psalmist, the affirmation that “the Lord is here” makes all the difference in the world!

Psalm 72 (Advent 2)

As Ps. 122:5 suggests, Jerusalem and Davidic monarchy were both vehicles of God’s reign; and it is not surprising that two key words from Psalm 122 recur in Psalm 72 — “justice” (Pss. 122:5; 72:1, 2, 4; NRSV “defend” in v. 4) and “peace” (Pss. 122:6, 7, 8; 72:3, 7; NRSV “prosperity” in v. 3). Psalm 72 is a prayer for the king/messiah and was perhaps originally used at royal coronations. In any case, it is clear that the king’s job description is to enact God’s purpose, to govern with justice and righteousness (vv. 1, 2, 3, 7) resulting in *shalom*, which will be measured especially in terms of the condition of the poor and needy (vv. 2, 4, 12-14).

While vv. 18-19 make it clear that God is the source of the king’s power and glory, the claims for the king are still striking. The enactment of justice and peace has cosmic consequences. The sun and moon are involved (vv. 5, 7, 17); the king’s work makes the earth productive (vv. 6-7, 16); all nations in all times recognize his reign (vv. 8-11, 15, 17). In light of historical realities, it sounds more than a bit overdone (see Isa. 11:1-10, the Old Testament lesson for Advent 2, which also affirms that the righteous rule of the king will have cosmic consequences). The kings very seldom governed with justice and righteousness, and the monarchy was obliterated in 587 B. C. This incongruity between Psalm 72 and historical actualities is the key interpretative issue. What is Psalm 72 other than an historical relic, a testimony to an ancient version of utopianism or the power of positive thinking?

To answer this question in a word, Psalm 72 is eschatological. As Robert Alter suggests, it is an example “of poetic form used to reshape the world in the light of belief.”⁷ As such, it is especially appropriate for Advent, during which we remind ourselves that we live between the times. Because Christ has come, we dare to affirm amid stark historical realities that “the Lord is here;” God rules the world. Because Christ is coming, we await the full manifestation of God’s reign. But in the meantime — already now — we and our world have been and are being reshaped. For those “in Christ,” as Paul puts it, already “there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new” (2 Cor. 5:17)! Commenting on another allegedly-utopian text, the Sermon on the Mount, Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon also provide a helpful perspective on Psalm 72:

The church is on the long haul, living in that difficult time between one advent and the next. In such times, we are all the more dependent on a community that tells us we live between the times, that it is all too easy to lose sight of the way the world is, now that God has come. Because we know something about the direction in which the world is moving, we are encouraged by that picture and

guided by the shape of its depiction of the way things are now that God has redeemed the world in Jesus.⁸

Psalms 72 depicts what we Christians believe is the “real world,” the way things are now that God has come. For us, Jesus is the clearest sign that God rules the world. We profess him to be king/messiah, the one who proclaimed and ultimately embodied the reign of God by defending the poor and needy, by offering peace, by inviting all nations to be blessed. King Jesus by his life, death, and resurrection affirmed what Psalm 72 affirms and what the world ignores: “right makes might.” He invites us to trust that good news and so enter God’s reign (Mark 1:14-15). In the reign of God, the crowns we wear are shaped like crosses; but they signify a peace that the so-called “real world” cannot give nor even begin to comprehend (see John 14:27; and Rev. 5:10, which envisions the people of God ultimately reigning with God).

Psalms 146 (Advent 3)

It is not surprising that the end of the Psalter returns explicitly to the theme which lies at its theological heart (Pss. 93, 95-99) — the reign of God (in addition to Ps. 146:10, see 145:1, 149:2). Psalm 146 is a song of praise (hymn), but its structure is unique. John S. Kselman outlines it as follows:

A (vv. 1-2) Opening

B (vv. 3-4) Wisdom

C (vv. 5-8b) God Creator and Redeemer

B (vv. 8c-9) Wisdom

A (v. 10) Conclusion⁹

This arrangement focuses attention toward the center; and interestingly, the middle line of the central section contains the word “justice” (v. 7a), which in Psalms 72 and 122 also designated the purpose of God’s reign. Verses 5-8b are similar to Matt. 11:2-11, the Gospel lesson for Advent 3, where Jesus answers the question of messianic identity by citing what the poor and needy are receiving (note the occurrence of “Messiah” in v. 2 and “kingdom of heaven” in v. 11).

Psalm 146 also recalls the beginning of the Psalter, where the royal/messianic Psalm 2 is fundamentally an affirmation of God’s reign (the word “sits” in v. 4 could be translated “is enthroned,” and note the final admonition in v. 11, “Serve the Lord with fear”). The word “happy” in Ps. 146:5 recalls the first verse of Psalm 1 and the final verse of Psalm 2; the word “perish” (Ps. 146:4) occurs in Pss. 1:6 and 2:11; and the antithesis of “the righteous” and “the wicked” is introduced in Psalm 1 and illustrated corporately in Psalm 2 as the kings and rulers of the earth oppose the agent of God’s rule. One of the effects of placing Psalms 1 and 2 at the beginning of the Psalter is to present the whole book as a call to decision, and this call to decision is explicit in Ps. 146:3-4 and implicit in vv. 8c-9, the two sections Kselman labels as “Wisdom.”

Will we be among “the righteous” or “the wicked”? The connotations of these terms may be confusing. We almost inevitably hear them moralistically; and to be sure, the decision which confronts us has a moral dimension. But the fundamental issue is this: Whom do we trust (see 146:3)? In the Psalms (and the whole Bible), the righteous are not the generally recognized “good people”; rather, they are the threatened, the persecuted, the maligned. To be righteous means to trust that one’s life fundamentally depends on God. The wicked, on the other hand, are not the

obviously “bad people”; rather, they are generally the prosperous and the proud. To be wicked means fundamentally to be self-ruled rather than God-ruled. In Biblical terms, wickedness means to be autonomous, which means literally to be “a law unto oneself.” Consider, for instance, Jesus’ opponents, who were the good, religious folk of the day. But trusting themselves and their systems, they saw no need to “repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15), which is the decision which Jesus called for in response to the reality of God’s reign.

Given the understanding of “righteous” and “wicked” in Psalm 146 and throughout the Bible, the preacher is confronted with a monumental challenge. We live in what Walker Percy called “the Century of the Self.”¹⁰ In the realm of personal maturity, we are taught to be autonomous — self-sufficient, self-reliant, self-determining, self-assertive, self-actualized. And in the corporate realm, insofar as we are able to think corporately, even the peace and justice programs of our churches are often grounded in the conviction that, as Hauerwas and Willimon put it, “It is all up to us.”¹¹ In contrast to the self-centeredness of our culture, the Psalms and the gospel challenge us to be God-centered: “Do not put your trust in princes,/ in mortals in whom there is no help” (Ps. 146:3). In short, do not trust yourself nor your clever systems, be they political, economic, or otherwise. The world tells us that “God helps those who help themselves” (see what the enemies tell the psalmist in 3:1-2), but scripture affirms that happiness belongs to those who know that their “help is in the God of Jacob” (Ps. 146:5; see 3:8). To praise God is to acknowledge God’s rule and our dependence upon God. Praise is both a liturgical act and the “mode of existence” for those who believe that their lives belong to God and not simply to themselves.¹² Advent, the celebration that “the Lord is here,” that God rules the world, calls for a decision. If preaching is meant to persuade, there is nothing more valuable we preachers can do than persuade people that their lives are not their own. There is nothing more appropriate for Advent 3, “Joy Sunday,” for therein lies the secret to what our world so desperately seeks but finds so elusive—being “happy” (Ps. 146:5).

Psalm 80 (Advent 4)¹³

If praise is the “mode of existence” for those who live under God’s rule, then prayer is a fundamental characteristic of this mode. Psalm 80 is a prayer; it is usually categorized as a communal lament and perhaps originated as a response to the devastation of exile (note the literary context, especially 77:67-72, 78:1-4). As a psalm for Advent, it is particularly effective in articulating the “dialectic tension of maranatha”: God seems to be present and not present. On the one hand, the prayer affirms that God rules the world. God is addressed as “Shepherd,” a title of royalty (see 2 Sam. 5:2, Ezek. 34:1-31); and God is “enthroned upon the cherubim” (v. 1). On the other hand, the people are clearly waiting for God to “come to save us” (v. 2). The word for “Shepherd” literally means “one who pastures/feeds” (see Ezekiel 34), but the people lament that they have not been fed properly. They eat “the bread of tears” (v. 4). This complaint is all the more poignant when one considers the plea of the refrain, “let your face shine” (vv. 3, 7, 19; see also Pss. 4:6, 31:16; Num. 6:25), and when one recalls the existence in the temple of the “bread of the face” (Exod. 25:30, 1 Kings 7:48; NRSV “bread of the Presence”). The bread of God’s face, God’s sustaining presence, has been replaced by the bread of tears.

So the people wait and pray. The refrain also contains the plea, “Restore us.” In the post-exilic era, the people may have envisioned restoration politically as a return to statehood and monarchy (see v. 17, which many commentators interpret as a

reference to a future king/messiah). If so, this hope was not fulfilled, and the royal vision was pushed further into the future (see Mic. 5:2-5a) and was later claimed by and for Jesus. As an Israelite king was supposed to do, Jesus embodied both the experience of his people (see John 15:1ff. in relation to Ps. 80:8ff) and the reign of God. His crowning glory appeared to be a God-forsaken exile — a cross. In an act of faith and hope like Psalm 80, we followers of Jesus dare to affirm that in Jesus the light of God shines forth to restore and give life. Like those who prayed Psalm 80 long ago, we dare to see and expect the reign of God where others see only chaos and expect nothing.

In short, we both celebrate and wait. To live in this paradox is to confront God in every circumstance and at every moment of our lives. It is, like the people in Psalm 80, to address God when God seems absent. It is to expect to see God in the most surprising places — in a manger — or the most God-forsaken places — on a cross. That we have to do with God in matters of suffering and death as well as in matters of prosperity and life is a remarkable affirmation, especially in a world where the most overtly religious folk are inclined to view suffering as evidence of alienation from God and where secular folk are inclined to locate the source of prosperity and life anywhere but in God. As we celebrate the advent of God incarnate, there is no better way to witness to God's reign than by continuing to address God out of our individual and corporate afflictions and to look to God as the only source of light and life. Psalm 80 reminds us that Advent never ends; it tells us where we are, who we are, what we are to do. We are always between the times. We are people of the cross and resurrection simultaneously. We celebrate the good news that "the Lord is here" even as we wait and pray, "come to save us" (Ps. 80:2)!

NOTES

¹ "Reflections on the Modern Study of the Psalms" in *Magnalia Dei, the Mighty Acts of God: Essays in Memory of G. Ernest Wright*, ed. F.M. Cross, W.E. Lemke, P.D. Miller, Jr. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), 378.

² *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, SBL Dissertation Series 76 (Chico, Ca.: Scholars Press, 1985), 215.

³ Ministry Unit on Theology and Worship of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, *Supplemental Liturgical Resource 7: the Worship of God* (Louisville: John Knox/Westminster Press, 1992), 47; see 46-48.

⁴ Walker Percy, *The Second Coming* (N.Y.: Ivy Books, 1980), 307.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 328.

⁶ Elie Wiesel, *A Beggar in Jerusalem* (N.Y.: Pocket books, 1970), 19.

⁷ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (N.Y.: Basic Books, Inc., 1985), 133.

⁸ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 86.

⁹ "Psalm 146 in Its Context," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988):591.

¹⁰ Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (N.Y.: Washington Square Press, 1983), 12.

¹¹ *Resident Aliens*, 36.

¹² Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1965 and 1981), 159; see 159-61.

¹³ For a fuller exegesis of Psalm 80, see my essay "Psalm 80:1-7: Psalm for the Fourth Sunday of Advent," *No Other foundation* 9 (Summer 1988):36-40. Several of the formulations and conclusions from that essay have been incorporated here. The journal is published by the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ, 2719 Marshall Ct., Madison, WI 53705.