

“The deaf hear, the dead are raised . . .” (Matt. 11:5): Advent as a Season of Eschatological Possibility

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It is a commonplace in North American culture that on the day after Thanksgiving, preparation for Christmas begins in earnest. Although the most obvious examples of this preparation are the flurry of post-Thanksgiving sales and the Thanksgiving Friday shopping rituals, it is too easy to target consumerism as the sole cause of this frenetic scenario. Much of the flurry of activity that marks the month of December—baking, decorating, celebrating, etc.—has less to do with consumerism per se and more to do with people's attempt to express the grace, love, and generosity that they see at the heart of the Christmas message. Yet it is the very intensity with which Christmas preparations are undertaken, no matter what their motivation, that poses the greatest challenge to the preacher during Advent.

The four weeks of Advent are not simply a warm-up for Christmas. Rather, the season of Advent marks the beginning of a new liturgical year in the life of the church, a time when the church's hopes for new life with God are born and expressed anew. It is the season when the church holds its breath in anticipation and expectation of the fresh coming of God into the world. The church's calendar thus is marked by the expectancy and preparation for the inbreaking of God, for the fulfillment of God's promises, not simply by the arrival of the Christmas season. It is the Advent preacher's difficult and often unpopular task to move the church away from Christmas preparation during the four weeks prior to Christmas day and turn the church's attention instead to Advent.

The preacher's greatest aid in keeping the theological and pastoral themes of Advent before the congregation is the lectionary texts assigned for this season. In particular, the OT lessons from Isaiah invite the church at Advent to enter into the world of God's eschatological promise and possibility.

Advent 1: Isa. 2:1-5 (Rom. 13:11-14; Matt. 24:36-44)

It is important for the preacher to remember that the lessons for the First Sunday in Advent are at the same time the first lessons of a new liturgical year. That is, these lessons mark not only the beginning of a particular liturgical season, but mark more broadly the initiation of a new period in the church's life with God and one another. The first Sunday in Advent is the first day of a new year, and this new year demands our attention as much as the ones we measure from January 1 through December 31 or according to the rhythms of the school calendar. We approach New Year's Day or the first day of school with a mix of anticipation and apprehension, and the beginning of a new liturgical year may evoke that same mix of emotions. As the church enters another Advent, it is called by the texts of the season and the rhythms of its communal life to look directly at God's hopes for the world and the church's place in the enactment of those hopes.

The lessons for the First Sunday of Advent bring the church face to face with the cosmic scope of Advent. The oracle of Isa. 2:1-5 paints a vivid picture of God's new

age and is an evocative text for the beginning of the church's new year with God. "In days to come" Judah, God's holy place, will be elevated so that it becomes a rallying point for all the nations of the world (v. 2). As vv. 3-4 make clear, the elevation of Judah is not for Judah's aggrandizement, but so that Judah's God will be more visible to the nations. In the new age envisioned by this text, all nations will be taught by God (v. 3) and will submit themselves to God's judgment (v. 4a). The conclusion of this vision is staggering in its claim, "they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore" (v. 4b). The longing and hope in this conclusion is as palpable today as it was when it was first uttered centuries ago.

Isa. 2:1-4 gives voice to the radical newness that is promised by a future shaped by God. It is a vision that quite literally envisions a whole new world, in which the world's former ways of doing business are transformed by the word and presence of God. Instead of learning war (v. 4), all the nations will learn and live the peace of God. The cosmic vision of Isa. 2:1-4 bespeaks confidence in the power of God to overcome the world's destructiveness and faith in the ultimate sovereignty of God and God's promises for life. Isa. 2:1-4 offers the ultimate eschatological vision of a time when God's new age will be the decisive and governing reality of the cosmos.

The lesson from Isa. 2 does not conclude with this evocative vision, however. Rather, the unit closes with an exhortation, in which the house of Jacob is summoned to "walk in the light of the Lord" (v. 5). What is the relationship between the powerful vision of vv. 1-4 and the exhortation of v. 5? The vision is positioned as the indicative on which the imperative of v. 5 is based. The summons in v. 5 to walk in the light of the Lord is a summons to live in the confidence of the fulfillment of God's hopes and plans for the world. The faith in God and God's future that receives expression in the vision should likewise receive expression in the community's present life with God and one another. The vision of vv. 2-4 is not positioned as a reward for good behavior, but rather the summons to faithful living in v. 5 is positioned as an act of thanksgiving and trust in God's sovereign care and hopes for the world. The God who will work cosmic peace, Isa. 2:1-5 is saying, is our God; what higher summons is there than to walk in that God's light?

Isa. 2:1-5 offers a remarkable frame for Advent preaching. It begins the liturgical year with a vision of hope writ large, a vision that reminds the church of the identity and character of the God who shapes its life. It also reminds the church of the radical newness that God's future holds and of its place in that future as it lives out its hope and faith in God.

The NT lessons continue the cosmic themes introduced by Isa. 2. The eschatological visions of Rom. 13:11-14 and Matt. 24:36-44 have a harder edge to them, however, because they focus less on the content of God's new age and more on the imminence and unpredictability of the time of God's inbreaking. Both NT texts sound the theme of wakefulness in the face of God's eschatological inbreaking (e.g., Rom. 13:11-12; Matt. 24:42-43). Like Isa. 2, both also incorporate into their eschatological visions a summons to faithful living and preparedness for the inbreaking of God (Rom. 13:13-14; Matt. 24:42). None of these lessons is about Christmas and Christmas preparation per se; rather each is about preparation for the advent of God into the world and the earth-shattering changes that advent will bring. The comfort and familiarity of our Christmas preparations may actually numb us to the radical claims the Advent season

makes upon the church's life, for those preparations can lead us to believe that we do know the day and the hour (cf. Matt. 24:36). The NT lessons thus stand at the beginning of Advent as a caution against equating our time and plans with God's time and plans.

In all of the lessons for the First Sunday of Advent, the church is summoned to enter into and embrace a vision of God's eschatological age. Each of the lessons pushes the faith community out beyond the limits of what is knowable and controllable and into the expanse of God's cosmic promises.

Advent 2: Isa. 11:1-10 (Rom. 15:4-13; Matt. 3:1-12)

Eschatological hopes for the inbreaking of God's new age also govern the Isaiah lesson for Advent 2. Isa. 11:1-10 is one of the classic articulations of Israel's hope for a messianic king from David's line (see also Isa. 9:2-7). David, whose reign united the Northern and Southern Kingdoms and brought unprecedented peace, stability, and prosperity to the area, captivated Israel's theological imagination. The advent of another king like David became one of the dominant expressions of Israel's eschatological hopes. Israel awaited the messiah king, whose reign would restore not only the peace known in the time of David, but indeed, would restore the fullness of peace envisioned by God at creation.

Isaiah 11:1-10 divides into two parts: vv. 1-5 which describe the characteristics of the messianic king, and vv. 6-10 which describe the reign of the messianic king. The progression of the imagery in these verses is significant. After establishing that the messiah will come from the same lineage as David (v. 1), the text moves immediately to describe the relationship of the messiah king to God (vv. 2-3a). The messiah is the one on whom God's spirit rests and who receives the necessary gifts for kingship from this spirit. Attributes that are traditionally associated with kingship (e.g., wisdom, counsel, might) are explicitly identified as coming to the messiah from God. The messiah's reign is thus portrayed as the embodiment of the spirit of God. The last gift of the spirit, the fear of the Lord, provides the interpretive context for all the other gifts. To delight in the fear of the Lord is to delight in God as the source of all gifts. To delight in the fear of the Lord is to delight in one's dependence on God's gifts. The hoped for messiah is one who knows and delights that his life comes to him from God.

Verses 3b-5 offer a glimpse of how the spirit-filled messiah will reign. The language of justice, righteousness, and faithfulness dominates these verses; the communal and social dimensions of these verses are also striking. Israel's eschatological hopes do not focus on the future of individuals, but on the future of the community. Israel's vision of the messianic age is one of prosperity and justice for all, not just for some. Israel longs for a king who will make God's justice and peace a reality.

The creation imagery of vv. 6-9 underscores this longing. The vivid language of these verses, well-known from scores of visual renderings of "the peaceable kingdom," depicts a time when even nature will reflect God's peace. Animals who are "natural" enemies will live as one, and the serpent, the quintessential symbol of the brokenness of creation and of human alienation from the natural world, will no longer be humanity's enemy, but instead will become the friend of children. The vision of vv. 6-9 transcends nationalist boundaries and aspirations and evokes an age when all the earth will be united in its knowledge of God. The messianic king, like the elevation of Judah in Isa. 2:2, stands as a visible sign of the inbreaking of God's new age (v. 10).

It is important that the christological move not be made too quickly or glibly in the

interpretation and appropriation of Isa. 11:1-10. Once the christological turn is made, the temptation arises to stop listening to the language of Israel's eschatological hopes and yearnings and to listen instead to the church's language of the fulfillment of these hopes in Jesus. Yet if we stop listening to Israel's hopes, we risk domesticating the possibilities of God's future made available in Jesus. That is, we risk focusing so exclusively on Jesus' life and ministry that we lose the bigger picture of God's hopes and yearnings for a transformed creation. To celebrate the advent of the messiah king into the world is to celebrate the advent of the One whose presence stands as a harbinger of the promises and possibilities of full life with God. To celebrate the advent of the messiah king is to celebrate the inbreaking of the reign of God, of a time that opens the world to the fullness of God's justice and peace.

Advent 3: Isaiah 35:1-10 (James 5:7-10; Matt. 11:2-11)

Isaiah 35:1-10 is a powerful celebration of this inbreaking of God's reign. This text offers the church a sustained vision of the restoration of God's land and God's people. The vibrant and poetic imagery of this text announces a people's faith, confidence, and hope in the sovereignty and providence of their God to restore a broken world to wholeness.

What is most striking about Isa. 35:1-10 is the way in which creation, social, and political language are completely intertwined. The interweaving of this language and the hopes it embodies underscore the completeness of the restoration envisioned by this text. That is, all the world's broken places will be made whole by the inbreaking of God. Crocuses will bloom in the desert (vv. 1-2), waters will be abundant in a land plagued by drought (vv. 6b-7). The weak and infirm will become strong (v. 3); the blind will see, the deaf hear, the lame leap like deer, the speechless sing (vv. 5-6a). Political prisoners will be returned (v. 10a), and joy and gladness will replace sorrow and sighing (v. 10b). The scope of this vision and the hopes to which it gives expression are electrifying; the faith in the possibilities of God that undergirds this language is breathtaking.

The language of Isa. 35 finds its way into Jesus' own speech in Matt. 11:2-5. Jesus responds to a question about his identity as the Messiah with a litany of acts that signal the inbreaking of God's reign. The echoes of Isa. 35 in Matt. 11 again remind the church of the eschatological context in which Jesus' ministry is to be interpreted. According to Matt. 11, Jesus himself understood the wondrous acts of his ministry as pointing to the inception of God's new age. The church's preaching about Jesus loses its edge when it ignores this eschatological perspective. During Advent the church does celebrate the advent of Jesus into the world, but that advent announces the advent of God's reign of justice, peace, and wholeness into a broken world. Isaiah 35 helps the church to remember that the season of advent celebrates the possibility and promise of God's restoration of God's world.

Advent 4: Isa. 7:10-16 (Rom. 1:1-7; Matt. 1:18-25)

The Advent season comes to a close with a celebration of the promise of Immanuel, God-with-us. The first three Sundays in Advent have moved the church into the world of God's eschatological promises; the lessons on the final Sunday of Advent position the church to bring these eschatological promises and yearnings into the story of Jesus. The promise of Immanuel in Isa. 7:14 is offered as a sign of God's

presence to a besieged and fatigued people, and this promise provides the lens through which Matthew interprets the advent of God in Jesus (Matt. 1:21-23). Matthew invites the church to embrace Jesus as the promised sign of God's presence with us, the Immanuel.

Jesus, Immanuel, does not supplant the eschatological hopes and yearnings of the earlier Isaiah lessons. Rather, he provides tangible assurance that their fulfillment is indeed underway. The deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news preached to them. To celebrate and rejoice in Jesus as God-with-us is to share in the visions of an age governed by God's wholeness, peace, and justice that sustained Israel in adversity. The Advent hopes of a restored creation, for which we wait in readiness and expectation, provide the necessary theological setting for our Christmas joy.