

Gospel Fragments for Advent

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The season of Advent is a jarring experience for both preacher and congregation. Advent is a relatively new and unfamiliar phenomenon for many Protestants. Only during the last fifty years have many Presbyterians, Methodists, and various congregationalists brought in the wreath. In one sense Advent “feels” superimposed, an artificially induced anticipation of anticipation by egghead liturgical purists. Particularly in North America, there is the clash between the secular Xmas warmth and cheer, and the more sober and even austere texts of the lectionary. The preacher’s temptation is to be all humbuggery and lose the good news somewhere in depression, frustration, and anger. In response to a parishioner who wanted to know what was so helpful about stumbling through the singing of “On Jordan’s Banks the Baptist’s Cry” on an already icy December morning, one pastor was heard to snort, “If you want to hear Christmas music, then go to the mall!” Certainly the yearly skirmishes over Advent music may be de-escalated with a bit more education and with pastoral acknowledgment of the cultural and traditional concerns of persons from non-liturgical backgrounds.

A second difficulty is with the artifice of waiting for Bethlehem when already the story of the birth is known. Who is kidding whom? Is Advent simply a church game similar to “only 28 days left until Xmas”? The gospel texts may be proclaimed and heard more clearly if they are allowed to stand on their own, rather than used primarily as props or commercials for what is to happen on Christmas Eve. As Fred Craddock put it in a masterful sermon on John the Baptist, “Did you ever hear John preach? If you haven’t, you will. Because the only way to Nazareth is through the desert. Well, that’s not really true. You can get to Nazareth without going through the desert. But you won’t find Jesus.”¹ The inherently fragmentary, nonlinear quality of the texts for Advent may be precisely what will communicate the gospel of Christ to disjointed, postmodern lives. Everything does not have to fit as if designed by Martha Stewart. In fact, when we leave room for untidiness, we can welcome the unruliness of the liturgical season.

Advent I—Luke 21: 25-36—Watch, Pray, Look Up, Stand

The widespread public fascination with premillennial dispensationalist heresy purveyed by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins in the “Left Behind” series should make the conscientious preacher eager to return to this Advent text. Apocalyptic themes are already on people’s minds (particularly young minds) and thus there is great opportunity for clarification. Though space here does not permit any elaboration, an excellent resource for preaching and teaching apocalyptic theology has been developed by the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey, and published as *The End of the World and the Ends of God*, edited by John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000).

Jesus not only lived and died and was raised; he shall come again. Advent begins by stating the obvious but mostly repressed reality that one day humankind will reach the end of our rope. All of our schemes for self-improvement, for extricating ourselves from the traps we have set for ourselves and others, will come to nothing. At the

deepest level we cannot save ourselves. Apart from the persistence and even intervention of God, humanity is doomed.

Advent is traumatic. Although every effort has been made to sentimentalize and tame Christ, his birth and ministry were highly disruptive. He was not what was expected (see Reinhold Niebuhr, vol.II of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*). Nor is He what is expected today. By the time Luke's gospel was written, the Christian community had endured major persecution. The temple in Jerusalem had been razed. Not even the temple was permanent. Worship was often in caves, literally and figuratively underground. To confess Jesus as Lord was to deny that Caesar/Nero is Lord, and thus to risk everything. The text from Luke 21 is not speculation about chronology, but affirmation and promise. First, Luke proclaims that God cares enough about creation and people to refine and redeem. Henry Sloane Coffin once said there is no more comforting text in the entire Bible than "our God is a consuming fire," which is our best promise that we will have a clean earth instead of the desecrated environment of the present.

Second, the message for the Church is that the end is not The End. The Bible looks forward neither to a big bang nor a cosmic crunch nor a whimper, but to a new creation, new heaven and new earth, new beginning. This is not simply optimism, not the way "things work out" automatically. It is a mighty, God-wrought act which encompasses a struggle and a wrestling with evil. The faithful response to this is not despair and gloom, but waiting and watching.

When we are waiting for a beloved person to return, we do not simply sit still with the house looking like it looks. Rather, we busy ourselves, eager to make the reunion a time of joy and comfort. We clean what needs to be cleaned, take out the trash; we prepare a meal. Likewise, as the Church gathers around the Table, we do show forth the Lord's death and open ourselves to His presence until He comes again.

The Church lives or dies by the faith that in Christ there is revealed, given, promised the way that all things shall go. Eventually the tomb indeed will receive Creation and all therein; beyond in Him all things hold together and shall be made new. That is surely a leap of faith, but not a vain one, when the alternatives are considered. No stranger to distress, Kierkegaard once prayed:

How very joyous it is to give thanks when into our lives You have poured down from above every good and perfect gift. But there comes a deeper joy and peace when a person can give thanks in the midst of misfortune, abandonment, hopelessness—when it seems his own thoughts have betrayed him, when all reason has left him, when there is only discouragement and disillusionment. Ah, to give thanks then! . . . When the odds are all against us, when there are those who would seek to convince us that we are without hope and without God in our world, then need we more than ever to hold on to Him who holds fast to us. ²

In recent years t-shirts and caps have appeared with the words "No Fear" printed on them. While that is simply the trademark of a brand of surfing and outdoor wear, it is also the astonishing and appropriate proclamation during Advent. When the waves of history crash in, and the tide goes out for the last time, fear not. Lift up your heads. Stand up, for your redemption is drawing nigh.

Advent II and III: Luke 3: 1-6 and 3: 7-18—John the Baptist

These two texts are full of potential sermons: preparing; returning from exile; the prophetic task; the reversal of values in the Kingdom; the joy of repentance; baptism and rebirth. The files of any preacher who has been around the lectionary for a while will abound with such themes. Below I have blended several into a meditation:

Human beings are ornery creatures of habit. Change is not easy or comfortable. "If God had meant for us to fly in airplanes, He would not have given us railroads!" Many of us set our alarm clocks for the same minute each morning, travel to and from work or school by the same route each day, eat approximately the same diet from month to month, go to sleep at the same time at night. We talk with the people we know more eagerly than we meet new ones, even in the Church. So often interruptions are viewed as irritations. Of course, *some* changes would be welcome. Winning the lottery. Being granted a lengthy, paid vacation. Rain in the midst of drought; a gentle snowfall; a refinement of talent. But even such pleasant changes are disruptive and do not always work out as initially expected.

As a rule the more affluent people become, the more complacent and self-satisfied and even cruel we can be. One year at the local interfaith Thanksgiving service, the Rabbi reminded us that America as we know it began with a handout—a helping hand from the Native Americans extended toward the Europeans who would not have survived the winter otherwise. And then the Rabbi asked, "Why is it that we are so against giving people helping hands or handouts today?" It is because we do not want to change, and we are uncomfortable even thinking about it.

Frequently the human response to change is anger. Like vipers, we coil and strike when disturbed from our hiding places. So many things have changed during our lifetimes, and this makes us insecure and angry. The columnist Russell Baker suggested that the United States is now "God's Angry Land." He says that "America is angry at Washington, angry at the press, angry at immigrants, angry at television, angry at traffic, angry at people who are well off, angry at people who are poor, angry at blacks and angry at whites. The old are angry at the young, the young angry at the old. Suburbs are angry at cities, cities are angry at suburbs, and rustic America is angry at both whenever urban and suburban intruders threaten the peaceful rustic sense of having escaped from God's Angry Land."³ Baker calls anger in America a new national habit, in the sense of addiction. Perhaps some of this anger is justifiable, but much of it at heart is the fruition of selfishness.

We prefer control to change. We like control. The only problem is . . . we are not in control. Advent is a season of self-examination, and a call for conversion, for change in the direction of the realm of God. For the good news to abide, the bad news of our lives, including much that is familiar and even blessed by the culture, must be abandoned. And so John the Baptist strides on to the scene whether we like it or not.

John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin. (Many of us have cousins who are a bit on the unusual side!) The Gospels connect him to Jesus even before

they were born. As an adult, he was an eccentric ascetic, living simply off the land in the wilderness. His message was a call to change, clear and disturbing. Repent. Be baptized for the forgiveness of sin. Prepare the way of the Lord. Share.

If one were drawing up a guest list for a holiday party, John would not make it. Can you imagine his showing up in dirty overalls and his navy surplus peajacket, wearing a stocking cap with holes in it and beggarlice around the crown, clomping in workboots which never have been anointed with polish? And then, cornering the nice people with some persistent admonitions about repentance? All the while with the leg of a locust protruding from his teeth? And yet, despite its dissonance, John's message keeps at us until finally we begin to understand. He is not simply an obnoxious killjoy; rather he urgently proclaims that we can be rid of our burdens, anger, and isolation. In Luke, John the Baptist's message calls to mind Isaiah's image of building a road, a way to peace from exile.

Recently I consulted a contractor friend about how to go about building a road. First of all, he said, survey. Then, to prepare a way in the wilderness, one must get rid of all the muck, digging down to more solid ground. Then, one must find the best materials available and bring them to the site. Then, there must be a great deal of cooperation and hard labor.

For the Church, an evocative symbol of Advent is building a road, preparing a way, together. Many of us have friends who help us the most by being honest with us, even sometimes being confrontational and challenging. Those very qualities are what make them our friends, not just nodding acquaintances. John the Baptist is that kind of friend, surveying, cutting through the pretense, sticking a shovel in the muck in order to clear it away. He knows there is no firm hope without change, without moving along a different route. He knows, and so do we, that preparation means sacrifice. John knows, and so do we, that the way of the Lord is prepared by sharing, by spreading wide a circle of peace and salvation. We are included in that circle today because John did not stay in the temple but cast a wide net in the wilderness.

Once a family brought out their nativity scene in early December. The two-year-old child was thrilled by the process of unwrapping the various pieces. There was discussion of each one. Here is Mary, the mother. Here is Joseph, and here is baby Jesus. Here are kings bringing their gifts. Here is the one shepherd carrying the smallest lamb, and the other one playing the flute there in the corner. Here is the donkey and there is the cow kneeling near the baby to keep him warm. Up there is the angel, who as usual needed fresh glue to remain on high. The scene was gloriously complete, and the parents moved on to other tasks.

The next day the parents noted a striking change in the nativity scene. There on the table the child had set all the favorite figures which had been lying around the house all year. It was as if they, too, out of season had arrived in haste—the busload of Fisher-Price people, the clown, the bears, the dinosaur, and the irascible Donald Duck. They all were included by the child. The circle was spread wide, wider.

What about it? Exile, anger, control, premature completion—or moving out, building a roadway, spreading wide the new life which God alone can and will provide?

Advent IV—Luke 1: 39-55—Magnificat

God, we affirm, has a will, an intention. And within this will, Scripture discerns that God has preferences. (“Election” is one way the Church has taught about preferences.) Apparently God has a penchant for accomplishing great wonders through culturally insignificant people. One could read the history of Israel that way—from Abram and Sarai through Moses (who was called five times before answering) to David (a shepherd boy) to the reluctant prophets who usually found themselves preaching to dwindling crowds. For a light to the nations, God could have chosen Egypt, Assyria, or Babylon; but instead, God chose the Hebrews. God seems to love to work miracles through the ordinary, and nowhere do we see this more clearly than in the person of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Whether she was of the underclass (as argued by liberation theology) or of the lower middle class, Mary was an unlikely candidate for royalty. Like many mothers of her day, she was young (probably no more than fifteen years old), and she was engaged but not yet married. How could she and Joseph ever support a child? Who was she to announce the scattering of the proud?

But as God had chosen old, barren Sarai, so now comes the call to young, inexperienced Mary. “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God”(1:30). Mary did not audition for her part, but was chosen by God. As Gail O’Day once wrote in this journal, “God enters her experience with a promise that is not even on the horizon of her hopes, and Mary responds with the ‘yes’ of faith.”⁴ The poet James Dickey noticed that in Mary, “an ordinary warmth became Holy.”⁵

Quoting Lawrence Ferlinghetti from the pulpit may not increase year-end contributions from retailers, but Ferlinghetti captures some of the tension and the power of the story:

... Christ climbed down
from His bare Tree
this year
and ran away to where
no fat handshaking stranger
in a red flannel suit
and a fake white beard
went around passing himself off
as some sort of North Pole saint
crossing the desert to Bethlehem
Pennsylvania
in a Volkswagon sled
drawn by rollicking Adirondack reindeer
with German names
and bearing sacks of Humble Gifts
from Saks Fifth Avenue
for everybody’s imagined Christ child

Christ climbed down
from His bare Tree
this year and ran away to where
no Bing Crosby carollers
groaned of a tight Christmas
and where no Radio City angels
iceskated wingless
thru a winter wonderland
into a jinglebell heaven
daily at 8:30
with Midnight Mass matinees

Christ climbed down
from His bare Tree
this year
and softly stole away into
some anonymous Mary's womb again
where in the darkest night
of everybody's anonymous soul
He awaits again
an unimaginable
and impossibly
Immaculate Reconciliation
the very craziest
of Second Comings⁶

God's mission on earth begins/continues with submission and trust from "anonymous" people who are surprised to be called. (Matthew's Gospel recounts the submission of Joseph!) The divine presence emerges through human submission, our placing ourselves at the service of One who is so much greater than our egotism. This young woman, said Karl Barth, became "the entrance gate of divine revelation into the world."⁷

Culturally, obedience is often classified as a feminine virtue, but biblically, submission is a human virtue. As well as Sarai, Abram was called to obedience, as were Noah, Joseph, David, and the prophets. The apostle Paul used the same terminology for his vocation as that used in Luke 1:38 for Mary—a servant or slave.

The Magnificat, or Mary's song, is based largely on Hannah's prayer in I Samuel 2. God intends to turn human values upside down and inside-out. There is an awful tension between human culture and the realm of God. Mary's song rivets the attention of the hearer upon the poor and dispossessed, which may be especially important for North Americans to notice when a cacophony of so many voices which implore us to buy, to harden our hearts, to fight not only over national borders but over toys in stores, to cling to tribal loyalties. It would take courage indeed to sing, "Lord, I want to be like Mary in my heart!"

Some years ago at Davidson College there was an Advent worship service which included J.S. Bach's *Magnificat in D*. A liturgical dancer emerged from the chancel, and thrilled the congregation with the presentation that, for the faithful, Mary's song

is anything but a dirge, but instead is an invitation to leap and to soar with both spirit and body. As the music ended, the dancer moved down the aisle toward the door, summoning all present to the work of magnifying God's glory in the world outside the elegant sanctuary.

Concluding Fragments

In eschatological hope, through a voice crying in the wilderness, and from the response of a young Jewish woman, God is reaching out to embrace both Creation and humanity. Out of the pain of his homeland of Croatia, Miroslav Volf has written an immensely helpful and provocative book entitled *Exclusion and Embrace*. In it he says, "I open my arms, make a movement of the self toward the other, the enemy, and do not know whether I will be misunderstood, despised, even violated, or whether my action will be appreciated, supported, and reciprocated. I can become a savior or a victim—possibly both. Embrace is grace, and 'grace is gamble, always.'" ⁸

The privilege of the preacher at the season of Advent is to receive and to trust God's embrace, to risk making the connection between the fragments of faith in the congregation and the fragments of Scripture which can sustain and empower worship, mission, study, and fellowship. Each believer and each preacher is like Mary—chosen and embraced by God to be "pregnant" with Jesus Christ, and called by God to offer our bodies and prayers that other people might live abundantly. At the end of Advent, may we be tired, exhilarated, and fuller than ever before with magnified mercy.

On December 12, 1968, I was groggily in attendance for the required chapel service at Presbyterian College in Clinton, South Carolina. Truly this was an unlikely place and time for any sort of Advent. In the bulletin, which for some reason I kept, was a prayer by Karl Barth which has become a sign of promise each December, particularly as I, having been called, continue to try to preach:

O Lord, now dost Thou permit us again this year to approach the light, the celebration, and the joy of Christmas Day, which brings before our eyes that which is the greatest of all: Thy love, with which Thou has so loved the world as to give Thine only Son, so that we might all believe in him and therefore not be lost but have eternal life. What then do we have to bring and give to Thee? The so great darkness in our human relationships and in our own hearts! The so many confused thoughts, so much coldness and stubbornness, so much frivolity and hate! So much with which Thou canst not be pleased, which separates us from one another, and which certainly does not help us on our way! So much that flies in the face of the message of Christmas!

What canst Thou then do with such gifts? And with such persons as we all are? But these are just the things that Thou wouldst have from us at Christmas and wouldst take from us—all the refuse, and ourselves as well, just as we are, in order to give us in exchange, Jesus our Savior, and in him a new heaven and a new earth, new hearts and new desires, new clarity and a new hope for us and for all people.

Notes

¹Fred Craddock, "Have You Ever Heard John Preach?", reprinted in *Best Sermons: Volume 4*, ed. James Cox (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 17.

²Quoted in Lois and George Bowers, *Soren Kierkegaard: The Mystique of Prayer and Prayer* (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing, 1994), 39-40.

³I clipped Baker's column several years ago but without the date—this angers me!

⁴Gail O'Day, in *Journal for Preachers* (Advent, 1990), 4.

⁵James Dickey and Marvin Hayes, *God's Images* (New York: Seabury, 1978).

⁶Lawrence Ferlinghetti, "Christ Climbed Down," in *A Coney Island of the Mind* (New York: New Directions, 1958), 69-70. Only the final three sections of the poem are included in this article.

⁷Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2: The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 188.

⁸Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 147.