

Preaching the Advent Lectionary

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The first Sunday of Advent is not simply the beginning of a new season; it is also the start of a new liturgical year and the beginning of the use of a different one of the four Gospels as the major source of the gospel readings for the year. Some denominations, such as Lutheran and Episcopal, are quite used to the church calendar. For other Protestant churches, however, both the liturgical year and the lectionary that goes with it are relatively new. For both kinds of churches, it could be very helpful at the beginning of a new year to say something about the year itself. In this regard, a brief look at the Gospel passages for the next four Sundays can tell us a great deal about the purpose of the whole year.

Two narratives

Luke is the basic Gospel for the new year; we begin with a selection from the twenty-first chapter, followed by two passages from the third chapter, and finally, a passage from the first chapter. Why is the order of the narrative created by Luke different than the order used by the liturgical year? Luke's Gospel follows a very logical pattern: some history before the birth of Jesus, then his birth, followed by his ministry, death, and resurrection. The church year, however, has some different concerns. Although most of the year will follow the chronological pattern shown in the written Gospels, there are some differences. To begin with, though Advent is a preparation for Christmas and the celebration of the birth of Jesus, Jesus was born long before this particular Christmas. In no sense is he born every year. For that reason, the church begins the Advent season with a stress on the Second Coming of Christ, expected at the end of history. His birth began a new stage in the history of God's work of redemption for the world, but it was neither the first nor the last part of that history. It is, however, a central event in that history.

Christian congregations seem to be divided between those that hear constant mention of the Second Coming, along the lines of the popular "Left Behind" series and other books like it, and other congregations where little or no mention is ever made of this element of the Christian tradition. And yet, when we recite the Apostle's Creed, we say that we believe that "he will come again to judge the quick and the dead." The work of Christ is finished, in one sense. That is, the cross and resurrection accomplished all that is needed for our redemption. But the victory of Christ is not yet visible in the whole world. It is still known only by faith. Christians believe that the time will come when his victory will be manifest to the whole cosmos. That completion of his work is at the Second Coming.

Advent begins with this stress, picking up some of the themes of the previous Sunday, the last Sunday of the old church year, the celebration of Christ the King. Therefore, the first Sunday in Advent is a link between the old year and the new, and sets the stage for our understanding of Christmas itself.

What needs to be clear to a congregation, especially one for whom the liturgical year is fairly new, is that this annual cycle rehearses the major elements of the gospel itself. It ties the church to God's work in Israel; it deals with the major events in the life of Christ; it celebrates the gift of the Holy Spirit; and it always emphasizes the

character of the life we are to live, both as individuals and as the church, as the people of God. It defines who we are and what we are called to do. There are some pastors and some churches that would choose certain elements of this gospel and neglect the rest. Some are content only with the cross, and ignore the resurrection. Others stress only the gift of the Spirit or the Second Coming—elements that other congregations would prefer to ignore. The church year and the lectionary that accompanies it help preachers and congregations make sure that the fullness of the work of redemption is rehearsed for us every year. As we begin a new year, we are confronted with this strange word about the Second Coming in preparation for our celebration at Christmas of the first coming.

The passage from Luke 21:25-36 is an apocalyptic teaching of Jesus and a call for faithfulness in the midst of tribulation. The Epistle lesson from I Thessalonians 3:9-13 picks up the same theme of faithfulness in the day when Christ returns. The Old Testament lesson from Jeremiah 33:1-16 shows the promise of God that a righteous king from the line of David will indeed come to execute justice and righteousness. In this context, it clearly points to Jesus as the fulfillment of that promise.

The eschatological theme does not disappear after the first Sunday of Advent. It is to be found in less obvious ways in the next two Sundays. But there are other matters that will take center stage. The second and third Sundays both use passages from the third chapter of Luke: 3:1-6, which tells of the appearance of John the Baptist, coming from the wilderness; and 3:7-18, which gives us the flavor of his preaching. What is chronologically confusing is that the next Sunday, the fourth Sunday of Advent, will speak of Mary's visit to Elizabeth before the birth of John the Baptist. John's preaching is important as a precursor to the ministry of Jesus, and must come before that ministry begins. But on January 6th, Epiphany, the church will celebrate the baptism of Jesus by John and the inauguration of the public ministry of Jesus. The initial work of John needs to be remembered before Christmas, since the baptism of Jesus by John will be celebrated at the end of the whole Christmas season. John is emphasized on the second and third Sundays, but Mary only appears on the fourth.

On both the second and third Sundays, there is also some emphasis on the coming reign of God. John's preaching points to this, and to the need for repentance. Paul's Letter to the Philippians is used for the epistle lesson on both of these days. The Second Sunday uses Philippians 1:3-11, which speaks of the church's need to grow in love and knowledge, so that its life will show forth righteousness "on the Day of Jesus Christ"—another term for the Second Coming. The Third Sunday uses Philippians 4:4-7, to which we shall return.

The Fourth Sunday in Advent clearly takes us close to the beginning of the Christmas story. Mary appears. Already pregnant, she visits her cousin Elizabeth, who is still expecting her son, John. The Old Testament lesson is from Micah, the word that the future one who will rule God's people will come from Bethlehem. In both the Second and the Fourth Sundays, instead of psalms from the Book of Psalms, canticles from Luke can be used.

A Joyful Season: and The Advent Wreath

Long before the present lectionary was developed, Philippians 4:4-7 was the passage read every year on the Third Sunday of Advent. It tells us to rejoice, because the Lord is near, or at hand. In Latin, it was termed "Gaudate" Sunday—"Rejoice" Sunday. Throughout the medieval period, and really until the Second Vatican Council

in the 1960s, Advent was considered a penitential season, just as Lent was. The mood was to be somber. The stress was on the coming judgment and therefore our need for a savior. The color of the season was purple, the color of penitence, just as that was the color of Lent. Even with the introduction of the Advent wreath by Luther in the sixteenth century, the color for the candles was still purple as were the vestments. An exception occurred on this Third Sunday, however. Because we were told to rejoice by this epistle passage, the purple color was changed to rose—lessening the somberness. This change of color had been there in the medieval church's vestments. Therefore, the candle for the Third Sunday was a rose-colored candle, not purple like the others. The Fourth Sunday returned to purple and to penitence.

The liturgical renewal of the mid-twentieth century changed the character of Advent, shedding its penitential emphasis. The color was changed to blue. It is now seen more as a season of anticipation and preparation rather than of penitence. This change has led to some confusion for congregations or families buying Advent wreaths. Some stores still sell three purple, one rose, and the white candle for Christmas. Others sell four blue and one white candle. Others, not caring for the blue, revert to the traditional Christmas red, with the white candle for Christmas.

In fact, the Advent wreath itself, aside from the colors, presents both confusion and opportunity. The wreath has moved from its Lutheran beginnings to both Catholic and Protestant congregations, even to some congregations that otherwise have little to do with the church year. Partly this is because it is a symbol that can be used in the home as well as in the church and has great usefulness in helping children understand some elements of the faith. It prepares us for Christmas in a way that the secular culture does not. At the same time, though the use of the wreath is very popular, there is no ecumenical consensus as to the meaning of the four candles. Some churches will stress faith, hope, peace, and love in some order. Others will stress certain characters in the Christian story, such as John the Baptist and Mary. Congregations may even make up their own meanings, and these may change every year. Symbols are a great help; but consistency in their meaning is necessary for them to be very useful.

In some ways, the Advent wreath is a great symbol in search of consistent meaning—meaning that will be constant across congregations and denominations, and generations. Perhaps that will happen in years to come. For now, it is helpful to understand its great usefulness and its confusions. If a congregation wishes to make full use of the Advent wreath, it needs to make decisions about colors and meanings. Especially parents of young children need help in making the connection between what the children see in church and what they see on the dining room table at home. Classes for young children could help prepare the children for celebrations in the home at the same time that their parents are also getting help. Parents who really wish to have some family devotions and yet have no clear idea how to do this appreciate the Advent wreath. It gives children a visual symbol and brief ceremony. It connects daily family life with Sunday church life. But they need help to make this happen. Brief devotions for every day, brief memorized phrases that young children can learn, all assist in making Advent real to the family, and counteract the push to begin Christmas at Thanksgiving that the commercialization of Christmas has promoted.

The Task of the First Sunday of Advent

In brief, the First Sunday of Advent can give an introductory word to the congregation about the meaning and purpose of the church year. It can introduce the

Gospel for the year, and point to the reason why the exact order of the written gospel is not the same as the use of the texts for the next four weeks. It can point to the significance of the Second Coming for our celebration of Christmas. In the midst of all of that, the Advent wreath, if used, can also be begun. That is quite enough for one Sunday. However, if this groundwork is laid, the next several Sundays can be far more meaningful.

Throughout the following three Sundays one can at least touch on the eschatological elements of the lessons. There is always the need to remember that though at Christmas we marvel again at the wonder of the Incarnation and the birth of Christ, we are those who stand at the other side, knowing who this child is, knowing his life and death and resurrection; and from that standpoint, we look again, and celebrate his birth. We are those who know the significance of his life and his earthly ministry. We are those who, even now, look for his coming again to complete the redemption he has gained for us. In no way is his birth a repeated event, as though he were born every winter and died and rose again every spring. It is fairly easy to turn the major Christian holy days into repeating nature festivals—celebrating the cycles of nature. That is why a secular society can celebrate both Christmas and Easter in some fashion as winter and spring festivals, even drained of all of their Christian content. It is for that reason that we need Advent as a preparation, restoring the specifically Christian elements of preparation, and rejecting the idea that Advent is simply a way to count the shopping days before Christmas.

The Sacraments in the Advent Season

Some congregations celebrate communion every Sunday. Others celebrate the sacrament on the first Sunday of every month. Still others have special services in accordance with the church year. This year, the first Sunday of the month is the Second Sunday in Advent. Whatever the practice of the congregation, there needs to be consideration of how the meaning of Advent intersects with the meaning of the Eucharist. The same is true of baptism. Some congregations may have a policy that baptisms occur only at certain times, such as Epiphany, Easter, and Pentecost. Other congregations schedule baptisms on any given Sunday, and that may well include Advent. If this is the practice, then there must also be concern that the meaning of baptism be connected with the meaning of the season.

In other words, the sacraments are not isolated events that can be dropped into different points of the church year with no coordination. For instance, especially in churches that practice infant baptism, such baptisms were placed very early in the service, probably to avoid a crying baby. There may have been seasonal hymns and prayers before the baptism, but then the sacrament came in with no reference to the season, and then, following the baptism, the service went on as though nothing had happened. No further reference to baptism was made in the worship. Churches that practice immersion may have a similar problem when they place the baptism at the end of the service with no reference to the coming baptism in the earlier part of the service. There was a different problem with communion. For centuries, in both Protestant and Catholic churches, communion really centered on Good Friday, on the sacrifice of Christ. Little or no mention was made of his birth, his ministry, his resurrection or ascension, etc., but the overwhelming message was about the death of Christ. Even at Easter, congregations that celebrated communion on that day often had an Easter service that stressed the joy of the resurrection, followed by a

communion service that put the congregation back at Good Friday. This has often been the way it was done in the past, but it really is not very helpful to a congregation. The liturgical renewal has changed that, though care must still be taken to integrate whichever sacrament is celebrated with the season in which it is celebrated.

It is relatively simple to connect either sacrament with the Second Coming. The Lord's Table not only takes us back to the Last Supper but also to the heavenly banquet in the coming reign of God. Baptism also points to the fact that we are to live as citizens of that reign even when it is not yet fully manifest to the world. The emphasis on John the Baptist points not only to the future baptism of Jesus, which is best left for Epiphany, but also to the call for repentance and the announcement of the nearness of the kingdom. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of the Savior it is helpful to remember that his incarnation is also a call for us to act as the children of God. The ancient church used phrases such as, "he is by nature what we are by grace" and "he is the Son of God by nature; we are the children of God by adoption." Baptism is the sign of that adoption, of that grace. There is a connection between our own baptism, however far in the past, and the meaning of the Advent, even if no baptism is celebrated in this season.

In conclusion, Advent can be an exciting season for a congregation. It mixes anticipation of great joy with the need for strong preparation for this joy. Those who do not prepare well will probably miss the joy of Christmas and be disappointed. In the midst of a secular, consumer society, this preparation is needed more than ever. If the church does not take the opportunity to prepare its people for the full Christian meaning of Christmas, that void will be filled by the surrounding culture, and that Christmas will become a sentimental winter festival, with Santa Claus taking the place of Jesus. We must not underestimate the need for such education. But this is not simply a matter of knowledge or information. Christians need to be involved in worship that moves them to comprehend on a deep level, both emotional and intellectual, the meaning of the season. There needs to be coordination between church life and home life. The use of the Advent wreath and liturgical elements with it that can be used in the home, especially with children, are excellent ways of accomplishing this. Many of our denominations are used to intellectual approaches to understanding the gospel; and yet, the seasons, particularly Advent and Christmas, are prime moments when the hunger for a wider approach to learning and appropriating the gospel can be employed. The popularity of the Advent wreath is simply a sign of the enormous desire for learning at the level of symbols and actions, and not words alone. Of course, symbols without words can be problematic, but our danger on that score is minimal at the present.

Churches that stem from the Reformation period, especially churches of the Reformed tradition, saw the danger of symbols that had degenerated into serious misuse precisely because the interpretation was lacking. The Eucharist and baptism without sermons to interpret them led to strange understandings in the minds of many. A reaction to that was sorely needed, and it came in the form of a distrust of symbols and a great emphasis on verbal teaching. However, in our own day, the barrenness of interpretations without symbols is a problem in its own right. The sacraments are part of that. They are multimedia presentations of the gospel that need interpretation to go with them, but also are means of teaching in ways that the sermon alone cannot do. Advent is a great opportunity to work at new ways of teaching and learning.