

The Advent Texts: Glorious Visions, Dogged Discipleship

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The last time we preached from these particular Advent texts was December of 2001. For many of us, that Advent season was at once most difficult and most meaningful. In past years at the church I serve, a boisterous group would gather in the sanctuary a few days before Advent began. The aroma of hot cider and cookies and the sound of recorded Christmas carols filled the air around us. We laughed and chatted as we brought out garlands and lights and wreaths and Chrismons and candles and banners, anticipating the joy of Christmas. In December of 2001, we gathered as usual, but nothing was usual at all. No one laughed very much that night and our conversations were quieter. After a few hours of hard work, we gathered in the sanctuary; tiny, white lights entwined in greenery shined down on us from wooden beams. Instinctively, each one of us sat down and for twenty moments no one spoke. We were content to sit together in the darkness with the lights shining their tiny rays of hope and promise upon us. All of Advent stretched out before us. For once, I think, no one was in a rush to Christmas. We needed Advent that year. We needed to be eased toward the joy and hope of Christ's birth, because all around us there seemed to be so much death. In that uncertain time, we urgently needed the assurance that Immanuel was with us still.

This Advent season we turn to the same texts and, while the raw pain of September 11th has abated, we are still a world aching and uncertain. The ongoing war in Iraq, the relentless violence between Israelis and Palestinians, the massacres in Sudan and of hundreds of children and adults in a school building in Russia are only a partial listing of the aching uncertainty that marks our world. Once again it will be an act of faith to put up garlands and light candles and walk with determination through Advent toward Christmas.

The texts this year make wonderful guides through Advent. The prophet Isaiah provides glorious visions week after week. These visions are full of life: high mountains with people streaming up the ascent toward peace; a green shoot sprouting from a stump—the early sign that life will flourish among the most unlikely pairings; a desert blooming no less than blind eyes opening to sight; and a young woman is pregnant with a child. But, lest we soar too high to these mountainous visions of glory, Matthew is our gospel guide through Advent and Matthew keeps us close to the ground. The gospel texts remind us that the way of discipleship requires dogged steps from determined disciples. There is the familiar first Sunday that warns us to be watchful and ready; then we get two doses of John the Baptist; and on the fourth Sunday we encounter Joseph, who must turn from carpentry, where every piece of wood is meant to fit neatly together toward God's plan, to a life where nothing seems to fit neatly at all. Matthew is particularly committed to pointing out the imperatives of the gospel...real discipleship lived in the very real world.

The First Sunday of Advent: Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:36-44

God Unexpected. Ah, the first Sunday of Advent. People come joyfully into a sanctuary decorated with an Advent wreath and candles, greenery and lights and banners all contributing to the festive atmosphere. At home and at church it is obvious that we are not in ordinary time or ordinary routines. Something special is going on. That's why we preachers just love to stand there surrounded by all of that festive beauty and...read Matthew 24:36-44. Suddenly, and that is the word for it, the festive mood comes to an abrupt end. Which, by the way, is what Matthew is warning us about—an abrupt end. Two will be in a field; one will be taken and one will be left, Jesus says. Two women will be grinding meal; one will be taken and one will be left. The *Left Behind* series of books has nothing on Matthew! We substitute our own list of modern daily activities for what folks were doing in the days of Noah. Then people were living their lives...eating and drinking and marrying. So we, too, spend our days having breakfast, dropping the kids off at school, getting on the subway, taking an elevator to the 105th floor, returning a phone call, planning a wedding, planning a vacation. Then a flood comes or a hurricane; or a plane crashes or a bomb explodes and plans and people alike are turned to ash.

That's how it will be when the Son of Man comes, Jesus says. You can look for all the signs you want, but there really won't be any warning. Just as a thief doesn't announce when he plans to break into your house, so God will not announce the time when God is going to break into your life and into the world again. So we'd better be ready all the time. Be watchful. Keep awake. Merry Christmas.

I have a fresh sense of the power of this warning. A few months ago, I was asleep alone in the house. It was 2:30 a.m. I had awakened to a flashlight beam shining outside in the darkness, but in my groggy condition I didn't think much about it. Then I heard the outside door open with force. The flashlight beam was now moving inside the house, in the next room. I listened to footsteps walk this way and that. I watched for a moment, trying to take in what was actually happening. Then the flashlight beam disappeared into another room. Maybe it was my son coming home unexpectedly from his friend's house, I hoped. But then the beam came back and was moving toward me in the darkness. "So this is how it is all going to end," I thought to myself, feeling disappointed. Instead I said, "Who's there?" hoping to hear my son's voice. There was silence, surely a bad sign, for it meant this wasn't a friend but foe. And the foe now knew that I was there and that I was a woman. I summoned what little courage I had, the kind of courage that comes from having no other choice, and said with as much authority as I could muster: "Who's there?!" The person ran out the door. I hid under the covers.

As scary as that experience was and this text can seem, it has helped me to clarify a crucial difference between a thief and the Son of Man and thus the way we might respond to this text. The thief breaks in to steal, to take away, to do harm. God will break in to bless and to build. The Son of Man, who will apparently come suddenly and dramatically, is coming to give life, not to take it away. The Son of Man is coming to complete the kingdom he has begun, not to topple it and us with it. It is Jesus who is coming again and because we know him, we do not need to be afraid. Jesus is not a thief or a terrorist, he is the good shepherd, the Savior of the world, the Prince of Peace.

Some people will live in fear, anxiously watching for any sign of the end-time. Some will live preaching and practicing judgment against enemies, sometimes assuming that our enemies are also God's enemies. Some will live carelessly, as though nothing we can say or do will make any difference in the grand scheme of things. But the biblical story offers another way to live in this meantime between Jesus' first appearance and his last. We can live not in fear, but with hope. This is the message Isaiah offers.

The whole of chapter one in Isaiah lays out a landscape of doom and gloom. Daily life in Jerusalem was bleak. A terrible scene of faithlessness and corruption is presented for 31 relentless verses, then Isaiah abruptly stops. Quite unexpectedly, quite suddenly, hope appears. He sees the mountain of the Lord and all nations are streaming to it. They listen and live according to God's law. Peace and justice prevail. In the first chapter, Isaiah described everything negatively: silver to dross; wine to water; princes to thieves. But as chapter 2 begins, Isaiah "sees" something quite different. God provides a vision of an alternative reality. Now the transformations are positive: swords into plowshare; spears into pruning hooks. There doesn't appear to be any human or historical reason for Isaiah to see such hope. It is a vision that could come only from God...the only One who is able to create such a radically new reality. Describing the vision of Isaiah 2:1-5, Walter Brueggemann writes: "There will be a cessation of political and economic oppression and threat. Moreover, there will be an end to hateful, divisive ideology. The nations will learn peace—and will practice it!"¹

In this particular time in our world, we begin Advent keenly aware that we are living in this crucial "in between time." While we do not live only in darkness and chaos, neither do we yet live in the full light of Christ. We are not to place ourselves among the anxious or the judgmental or the careless, for we know the One whom we expect. We hold to the vision of the new reality of peace and justice God intends. So we Advent people begin this season as we will end it—in hope. And we live these days in faith; we work for justice; we practice peace.

The Second Sunday of Advent: Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

The Man Behind the Message. Every year it is the same on this second Sunday of Advent. We have finally gotten the Christmas tree up in our homes; its lights give a soft glow to the room. We have adjusted that little nightlight bulb that shines gently behind our manger set giving that whole scene a cozy, intimate look. As the evening settles in, so does a peaceful feeling. We even begin to feel that peace is possible in our own lives and in the world. We sip a mug of hot cider and listen to the boy choir from King's College, Cambridge. We inhale the scent of fresh pine and are just about to exhale our contentment when...

John the Baptist comes crashing into our living rooms, flipping on the overhead lights. We are left squinting until our eyes adjust to the bright harshness that comes in with John. Like hot cider burning our tongue, John blazes white-hot. He's got a winnowing fork in his hand for an object lesson and he's yelling like a street corner preacher. Forget the dulcet tones of the choir. All holiday music has been drowned out by this man who has no intention of blending his voice or even singing in the same key as everyone else. "You brood of vipers!" he yells. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near! Right now God has laid the axe at the root of the tree. So you

better get busy bearing good fruit or else get ready to be thrown into an unquenchable fire!"

Each year John the Baptist appears in the wilderness of our lives, of our sanctuary, to sound the alarm. He pronounces judgment on our readiness to receive the Messiah. John arrives with the blazing headline that the kingdom of heaven is near and everything is going to be different under this king's rule. John has only to point to the headlines of our newspapers to demonstrate how woefully unprepared we are for life under this new reign. John's words are intended to shake us up because shaking things up is what happens when the kingdom of heaven breaks in on the kingdoms of this world. John says we don't have a clue about how out of touch we are with God's reality because we've grown so comfortable with our own.

While John preaches a fiery message, Isaiah spins out poetry unparalleled. Though they have very different styles, John the Baptist and Isaiah were actually preaching very similar messages. Perhaps Isaiah was a bit more polished than John...and maybe better dressed (and fed), but Isaiah also saw Israel with a realist's eye. He looked at the kingdoms of his time and knew they were corrupt, bent on destruction. Both Isaiah and John declare that God can change the political and social structures of the world. In fact, they are sure that God *will* change all of that.

Isaiah says that when we looked to David as king, we did not have our sights set high enough. God will raise up a new ruler who will not judge by what his eyes see or decide by what his ears hear. By the spirit of the Lord, justice and righteousness and faithfulness will not only be internal qualities but will be the very clothes this new ruler wears. We have grown used to a consumer society and to a political system where the people who have economic might or military power get their way. But God's appointed one will arbitrate for the poor, stand for those in need, and decide in favor of those who are meek. He will set human relationship in a right order. And once human beings are set right with each other, then things will straighten out in the animal kingdom, too. There will no longer be, anywhere, a relationship where the strong devour the weak. Every living thing can lie down in peace and eat in leisure and play unafraid.

Once I was giving the children's sermon on this Sunday. I showed them a small statue of a lion lying down; on his outstretched paws rests a lamb. I asked the children what they thought of this. Jack, one of our youngest theologians, said, "Well in the Bible it says they will rest together. But in *real life* the lion would eat him!" That is it in a nutshell! The vision is glorious. Real life is something else. In Christ, God has come to close the gap between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of heaven. God is intent on a world where the streets are safe in Jerusalem and in the Gaza Strip, where a life in Darfur or Tikrit is honored every bit as much as a life in New York City. The announcement of the kingdom of heaven means that those of us who use power unjustly or waste resources carelessly are going to be judged swiftly and surely. We'll either have to change our ways or find some other kingdom to live in, because we can't live like that in the kingdom of heaven.

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!" John yells urgently. Bear fruit worthy of repentance. The tree that is not bearing fruit will be cut down. God's soil can't continue to be drained by a tree not willing to give back what is nourishing.

Those of you who have a particular ancestry or nationality get no special treatment, for God can pick up a stone and turn it into a biblical blueblood.

The second Sunday of Advent would be completely unsettling, unbearable if we didn't know the One to whom John points with his bony finger. Given the labyrinthine political and social structures we have created, it would seem impossible for things ever to be different, except that we can see laid over Isaiah's description the description of Jesus Christ. He is the green shoot growing out of an old stump. And we are his branches, meant to bring greening life where there seems to be only a lifeless end. These texts urge us to bear fruit in our own lives, in our church, so that justice and equality and safety come to characterize all relationships. The question is urgent since the axe is already laid at our roots and John the Baptist is standing nearby, tapping his foot.

The Third Sunday of Advent: Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11

A Question from Prison. It happened last year at Christmas. I saw it in his face before he ever uttered the words. There is a nine-year age difference between my two children. My six-year-old daughter approached Christmas with a long list of wished-for items she hoped Santa would bring. She was not disappointed. On Christmas morning, piled high on a chair were games and dolls and pajamas and art supplies. On another chair nearby were my teen-aged son's gifts. The little collection was paltry in comparison, if one measured gifts in size and quantity. Oh, I had asked him for weeks to give me a list. I had begged him to provide ideas, preferably specific bar code numbers...but got little out of him. So Santa fretted and did her best...but on Christmas morning, it was underwhelming. I saw it on his face before he ever said aloud, "Hmmm, not as much to this as I had hoped!"

Though it is perhaps a silly comparison, I am wondering if that might have been what John was thinking and feeling about Jesus as he sat in prison. How did John get to this place of questioning? Just last Sunday he was preparing the way for the Messiah with fiery rhetoric and enthusiastic warnings to repent. He was confident and bold. Only one week later we find him closed up in prison with his hopes closing up, too. John asks a poignant question of Jesus by way of his disciples: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Maybe John was underwhelmed when God's Messiah turned out to be his cousin Jesus, no winnowing fork in sight. "Hmmm, not as much to this as I had hoped!" he might have said.

John had hoped for a Messiah who would turn the political world over. He wanted a judge to vindicate the righteous and damn the wicked. John had good biblical warrant to expect this kind of Messiah, and he had preached his heart out to get people ready to face the new order. What John saw instead was Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners and telling people to love their enemies. It hadn't exactly worked out the way he had thought it might. Sitting in a prison cell facing death just underscored his point.

Jesus does not give a yes or no answer to John's question, but tells John's disciples to go back and give their own testimony about what they see and hear around them: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news preached to them. It is as clear a reference to Isaiah 35 as you are likely to find. Jesus knew that John would recognize those words even

if he didn't recognize Jesus as the Living Word. Jesus is who John expected, but not in the way John expected him. He did not come to destroy the wicked, but to restore us all.

Isaiah again offers a glorious vision where landscape and people alike are folded into God's promised healing and restoration. Wilderness, dry land, desert...waters, streams, blossom. Blind eyes opened, deaf ears unstopped, the lame leap, the speechless tongue sings for joy. The redeemed, the ransomed, and the foolish all return on God's highway.

Some people will take offense at the kind of Messiah Jesus turned out to be. He hopes John will not be one of them. They wish for more. They expect something, someone, else. In this season of expectation, as we make lists of our wishes and wants, this text invites us to re-examine all of that. Given the kind of Messiah Jesus turned out to be, we have much to learn about the kind of disciples we are meant to be.

The Fourth Sunday of Advent: Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25

The Strong, Silent Type. In Isaiah 7:10-16, King Ahaz lives in fear that Judah will be attacked by Israel and Syria. So afraid is he, that Ahaz is about to turn to Assyria for help and security. Isaiah calls the king to radical faith, to depend on God for security and a future. It appears that fear wins out over radical faithfulness. Even the promise that a woman will bear a child, Immanuel, God-With-Us, is not enough for Ahaz. He prefers the tangible support of a strong military, standing in sharp contrast to Joseph, to whom we now turn.

The Nativity set in our home is extensive and colorful. We delight every year in unwrapping each figure and arranging the scene. But every year, just which figure is Joseph is a matter of personal opinion. Any one of five or six shepherds is a likely candidate for Joseph. Every year, I'll admit, I look in that stable and wonder if I have the right man as the father of baby Joseph. ...of course, that was Joseph's question, too. Who's the father?

Matthew is the only gospel that deals with the question of Joseph at all. Otherwise, he gets lost in the Nativity crowd. Luke's gospel barely mentions him. Look him up in your *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Go to "J" and you'll find him listed this way: *Joseph, the husband of the mother of Jesus*. Even in Matthew, he appears in chapter one, disappears by chapter two, and never utters a direct sentence. Matthew spends 17 verses detailing Joseph's family tree. Matthew begins with Abraham and works his way toward that next genealogical star, David, and doesn't stop until he gets to Joseph and that rather awkward connection to Jesus, the Messiah.

And awkward it was. But then, biologically and theologically speaking, the incarnation is awkward. The theological notion that the Lord of the Universe would become a baby in human flesh has been a stumbling block from the beginning. What made the incarnation awkward for Joseph began with biology but moved fairly quickly to theology. To start with, Joseph was engaged to Mary and in his day that meant they had already signed the marriage license. Even though they weren't yet living together, everyone knew they were Mr. and Mrs. Carpenter. If some problem arose in this engagement period, you couldn't just take the ring back and cancel the florist, you had to file for divorce. For Joseph, a problem had arisen indeed and with every

passing week, the problem got a little bigger. From the story Mary told him about *how* she became pregnant, Joseph must have been concerned about her morals *and* her sanity.

But Joseph dropped the paternity question and instead began to ask himself what he should do about their marriage. About Mary. About this baby. Joseph was a righteous man, which means he knew the scriptures and lived according to the law. He had two options: cast Mary out in disgrace and get his divorce, or have her stoned to death. Perfectly legal, perfectly righteous, and a lot of people would stop right there. The Bible said it, I believe it, that settles it.

Fred Craddock points to this story of Joseph when he says, “I get sick and tired of people always thumping the Bible as though you can just open it up and turn to a passage that clears everything up. You can quote the Bible before killing a person to justify the killing. ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’ the Bible says.” Craddock is just getting warmed up. “Do you know what the Bible says? ‘If a man finds something displeasing in his wife, let him give her a divorce and send her out of the house.’ It’s in the Book. Do you know what the Bible says, ‘Let the women keep their heads covered and their mouths shut.’ Do you want me to find it for you? It’s in there. I run into so many people who carry around a forty-three pound Bible and say, ‘Just do what the Book says.’”²

Craddock goes on to say that Joseph did a remarkable thing for his time and place. He dared to read the scriptures not only through the lens of the law but through the lens of the nature and character of God as well. Based on his own family tree, Joseph knew that God is merciful and loving beyond our deserving. So Joseph looked for another way to resolve this awkward situation. I imagine Joseph had not gotten much sleep while he figured out what to do. He tossed and turned in the dark night. He paced the floors during the day, shuffling through shavings of wood. He sanded too hard or carved too deep, lost in anguish and worry. On the one hand, the law. On the other hand, Mary. At last he thought of a way to honor both. He would divorce Mary quietly so as not to embarrass or endanger her or the baby. With the dilemma solved, Joseph lay down and slept.

He was in for another surprise. An angel appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him “what appears to be a moral outrage is, in fact, a holy disruption. That the child in Mary’s womb is not a violation of God’s will, but an expression of it, a gift from the Holy Spirit.”³ Joseph, who had already resolved to go far beyond what the law required, learned that he had not gone nearly far enough in practicing mercy and love as God intended it. Joseph was asked to keep his marriage to Mary. He was asked to name the baby ‘Jesus’ and become the adoptive father, the crucial link in the genealogical chain that stretched from Abraham to David to Jesus.

A baby conceived by the Holy Spirit. An angel appearing in a dream. The Lord of the universe incarnate in a baby. It is all very awkward. Joseph would not find any of this in the Book of rules he had followed all of his life. Righteousness as he had practiced it helped to keep things in proper order and in their proper place. But here the whole New Testament starts out with proper orders and proper places being wholly changed, utterly transformed. In Matthew, God begins by commandeering a family tree, upending the law and redefining righteousness. From here on out, if Joseph—and the rest of us, for that matter—say “yes” to this surprising, awkward

God, then discipleship becomes much riskier and faithfulness becomes much more open-ended than it has been before.

This Gospel presents Joseph as a model for the Christian life. He is the strong, silent type...except that he once said a bold, brave, and trusting "Yes" to God. Matthew makes it clear from the outset that God is not interested in disciples keeping their heads in a Book, looking up the rule that supports or justifies righteousness as we human beings see it. God is interested in disciples who will wrestle with the complexities of their lives and relationships and the world. God is interested in disciples who will listen for the voice of God, wide awake and in our dreams. God is interested in disciples who will join with God, even when God's will shocks us or upsets us and the way things have always been. Discipleship to this God is not settled and easy. It is awkward and risky and open-ended, just what is needed in our awkward, risky and open-ended world we live through and beyond this Advent season.

Notes

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Westminster Bible Companion, Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 23-25.
2. Fred Craddock, "God is With Us," *The Cherry Log Sermons* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 5.
3. Thomas G. Long, *Westminster Bible Companion, Matthew* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 13.