

Preaching Advent Hope While Millions Are Reading the Left Behind Series

Guy Sayles

First Baptist Church, Asheville, North Carolina

Millions of people are reading the *Left Behind* novels, and most of them are not reading for entertainment or diversion. They are reading in search of hope. *Newsweek* writer David Gates attempted to explain why “one in eight Americans” is “eager” to read “all these strange books about the end of the world”:

Well, check the news tonight. As the world gets increasingly scary, with much of the trouble centered in the Middle East—just where you’d expect from the Book of Revelation—even secular Americans sometimes wonder (or at least wonder if they ought to start wondering) whether there might not be something to this End Times stuff . . . Scholars reconstructing the popular history of the first years of the 21st century—if there still *are* any—will have to grapple with the phenomenon of “Left Behind.” In an age of terror and tumult, they may find, these books’ Biblical literalism offered certitude to millions of Americans amid the chaos of their time. ¹

Never mind that the “certitude” which the books offer grows out of a questionable scheme of biblical interpretation known as “Dispensationalism,” which has its origins in the musings of John Nelson Darby, a nineteenth-century Plymouth Brethren minister.² Never mind that the hope inspired by these books depends on the conversion of the Jews (in supposed fulfillment of “prophecy”), on the destruction of God’s various “enemies” (too numerous to enumerate), and on the decimation of vast stretches of creation. Despite (because of?) these flaws, the *Left Behind* books reassure millions of readers with the hope that good will triumph over evil.

The people to whom we preach, whether or not they are reading these eschatological potboilers, are all searching for hope in the face of personal and collective tragedy, sin, brokenness, and conflict. During Advent, a season of yearning and promise, we declare the hope we have: God has come and is coming among us in Jesus Christ.

Preaching this hope is not the same thing as inspiring optimism, but distinguishing them from each other is difficult in the United States, which Douglas John Hall calls “the officially optimistic society.”³ American optimism is confident about the triumphant strength of human ingenuity, resilience, and goodness, and it is convinced that the future holds unlimited opportunity and unending progress. This optimism finds expression in political speech. Ronald Reagan claimed that it was “morning again in America” and current Vice-Presidential candidate John Edwards says that “in our country, our America, everything is possible.” It permeates popular culture. Americans sing the words from *Oklahoma*, “Oh, what a beautiful morning, Oh what a beautiful day/I’ve got a beautiful feeling, everything’s going my way”; and with *Annie*: “The

sun'll come up tomorrow. . . . Tomorrow, tomorrow, I love ya.” Americans believe, or want to believe, in the power of a sunny disposition, a can-do attitude, will-power, and “positive”—or “possibility”—thinking.⁴

We should give optimism its due. Research into what Daniel Goleman and others call “emotional intelligence”⁵ demonstrates that, while people with a “pessimistic explanatory style” have a firmer grasp on the facts and the givens of life, they also lack the will to take action in the face of those realities. Optimists, while not as realistic as pessimists, tend to be more engaged in the search for solutions to the problems they confront than are pessimists (Not being confused by the facts appears to have some adaptive value!). Americans resonate to optimism because they are pragmatists, and optimism “works,” until harsh experience causes it to crumble. Even when it does, however, most Americans simply attempt to rebuild it, because they have no other shelter for their fears of the future. They recommit themselves to optimism, because it is as close to authentic hope as many of them ever come.

In our attempts to preach genuine hope, we would be well-served by rereading Jurgen Moltmann’s classic, *Theology of Hope*. In the opening pages, Moltmann makes this bold, but, I think, incontestable claim:

From first to last, and not merely in epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present. The eschatological. . . is the medium of the Christian faith. . . . [T]he glow that suffuses everything here is the dawn of an expected new day. For Christian faith lives from the raising of the crucified Christ, and strains after the promise of the universal future of Christ. There is only one real problem in Christian theology, . . the problem of the future.⁶

Here is something decidedly different from our official optimism, something powerful and wonderful. Whereas optimism is simple and straightforward, hope is complex and paradoxical. The Christian story is a narrative of contested, not inevitable, hope. It is promise and “straining after the promise.” It is the announcement that the Messiah is coming, followed by the long Advent wait for the Messiah’s appearance. It is the declaration that the Messiah has come, followed by the difficult confusion over why, if the Messiah has come, all has not yet been made well. Christian hope is characterized by the tension and anticipation one feels as night is ending and the sun begins its rising. In Moltmann’s words: “The believer is not set at the high noon of life, but at the dawn of a new day, at the point where night and day, things passing and things to come, grapple with each other.”⁷

Hope is not resurrection in isolation from the cross; it is resurrection made necessary and possible by the cross. Hope is not a utopian future unrelated to the vagaries of the past and the ambiguities of the present; it is a future in which God redeems history, establishes justice, and brings peace. Hope is not a wholeness unacquainted with brokenness; it is brokenness made whole by grace. Authentic hope is always paradoxical: embodied by the risen, but eternally scarred, Jesus. Hope always bears the marks of prior wounding, and walks into the future on legs once

paralyzed by fear. The Apostle Paul expressed the paradoxical nature of hope in this way:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us (Romans 5:1-5).

Hope simultaneously embraces those who suffer and insists that suffering will not have the last word. The last, the ultimate, experience will be our sharing in God's glory. Without a vision of that future glory, there would be little light on our present struggles.

In *Theology of Hope*, Moltmann also said that: "Hope finds in Christ not only a consolation *in* suffering, but also the promise of the divine protest *against* suffering."⁸ There is no consolation in suffering apart from such a protest. Only when we know that God does not actively will our pain is it possible for us to trust God with our pain. We will welcome the shepherd who walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death, only when we are convinced that this shepherd is also the Lamb of God, whose death and resurrection are dispelling the deepest darkness of that shadow: the threat of final separation.

Not just our preaching, but every part of ministry is lived-out in this tension of *hope as comfort* and *hope as protest*. We visit the elderly in the nursing home; we hold their hands, wipe their brows with cool cloths, sing softly to them, and share with them the bread and cup of Holy Communion. We are present with them, assuring them that they are not abandoned and alone. We comfort them, but we also protest, don't we? We protest against the cult of youth which demeans the humanity of all who are scarred, wrinkled, limited, and burdensome. We lament their marginalization; we grieve the loss of their wisdom; we work for a change in the conditions of their care; we seek a transformation of our culture's values.

Ministry announces and works for both mercy and justice. We ladle-out soup to the hungry, and we also long for an end to the conditions which create hunger. We tutor inner-city kids, and we also work for more nurturing schools and better family life and more supportive neighborhoods. We counsel the couple whose marriage is cracking under pressure, and we also question the consumerism and materialism which intensify the pressure they feel. Mercy is hope as comfort; justice is hope as protest.

Hope is also both "*exaltation*" and "*obedience*."⁹ We know hope as a kind of exaltation in those moments that lift us above the usual horizon of our sight. We see beyond, and we see more. We sense our destiny reaching out to us from the future. We experience "tremors of bliss" and "feel ourselves," as Glenn Tinder put it, "on the boundary line of the eternal country where we belong."¹⁰ Isaiah of the exile gave voice to this kind of exalted hope:

Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

There are moments when our strength is renewed, and we soar. Such moments of exaltation sustain us in those seasons when we experience hope as obedience—when it is a discipline of faithfulness. In those hard seasons, hope is more of a cultivated virtue than a felt emotion. It is reassurance of a meaning not yet seen and confidence in a purpose not yet realized.¹¹

According to Annie Dillard,

Hasidic Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav noticed that if dancers could persuade a melancholy person to join them, his sadness would lift. And if you are that melancholy person, he taught, persuade yourself to dance, for it is “an achievement to struggle and pursue that sadness, bringing it into joy.” In 1903 [a year in which Russia passed a number of laws “hobbling Jews”], this same Rabbi Nachman said, “I have danced a lot this year.”¹²

Hope as obedience means disciplining ourselves to dance—to engage in those practices which the long-accumulated wisdom of faithful people teaches us can help us to nurture hope. Those practices, those means of grace, are familiar to us, and we commend them to those who hear us preach: regular engagement with Scripture, prayer, works of mercy and justice, silence, hospitality, gathering around the Lord’s Table, and keeping the Sabbath.

Hope, then, is paradoxical: exaltation and obedience, comfort and protest, mercy and justice, promise and straining after the promise. How do we preach this kind of hope? I think we need *eschatological preaching*, not in the sense of preaching about “*last* things,” but about *ultimate* things. Eschatological preaching is not quite the same thing as preaching about eschatology. Molly Marshall has recently written:

Traditionally, eschatology has been approached from the perspective of the return of Christ, the destiny of the unevangelized (i.e., the non-Christians), the resurrection of the dead, the hope of glory for the redeemed, the earth’s demise, the “great white throne” where the supreme judge sits (Revelation 20:11), judgment with regard to inclusion and exclusion (not to mention rewards), and so on.¹³

Eschatological preaching is not, necessarily, preaching which addresses such themes; instead, it is preaching which addresses the here-and-now from the vantage point of God’s promised future. It lifts our gaze beyond the brokenness of this world, shows us the world made whole, and gives us reason-against-reason to hope.

Eschatological preaching announces the dawning which has occurred and anticipates the flooding of the whole cosmos with light. On Christmas Eve, for instance, we join eighth-century Isaiah in declaring: “The people who walked in

darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined.” That shining light, known to Christians as Jesus, illumines a receding but still-present darkness and points toward the bright city which “has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb” (Revelation 21:23).

Eschatological preaching is not *other-worldly*. It is not escapist; it does not counsel retreat from engagement with the so-called “real world.” It is, though, *another-worldly*. It does not imagine rearrangement, however radical, of the present order, but the realization of an utterly alternative order.¹⁴ We are headed, this kind of preaching promises us, toward a time when

the mountain of the Lord’s house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.

Many peoples shall come and say,
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.”

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
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 any more.

(From Isaiah 2:1-5, First Sunday of Advent, Year A).

And,

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God. . .
Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool,

and the thirsty ground springs of water;
 the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
 the grass shall become reeds and rushes.
 A highway shall be there,
 and it shall be called the Holy Way;
 the unclean shall not travel on it,
 but it shall be for God's people;
 no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.
 No lion shall be there,
 nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
 they shall not be found there,
 but the redeemed shall walk there.
 And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
 and come to Zion with singing;
 everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
 they shall obtain joy and gladness,
 and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.
 (From Isaiah 35:1-10, Third Sunday of Advent, Year A).

Eschatological preaching could just as easily be called *Advent preaching*, because Advent urges upon us a vision of a new world, a vision which stirs in us a holy restlessness for the complete transformation of ourselves and all things, and which assures us that we live toward, not the sputtering end of things, but toward the day when "all shall be well."

Advent preaching traffics in dreams, visions, and imagination, as do the texts of this season. Advent preachers imagine the beauty and goodness of God's dominion; fashion or find metaphors, images, and stories which give voice to what they have seen; and invite others to experience for themselves what their lives will be like in God's saving order of things. We should risk both boldness and breadth in our Advent preaching. After all, what could be bolder than the story of God's becoming flesh and surrendering to vulnerability in the life of a Galilean woodworker? What could be broader than the claim that the whole cosmos is being redeemed by the death and resurrection of a Jew who was born, under questionable circumstances, to pious peasant parents in obscure Bethlehem?

The bold dreams and expansive visions of the Advent texts inspire us to trust the audacious promise which is at the heart of all hope, the promise the angel made to young Mary, stunned by the announcement that she was to be the mother of God's child: "Nothing will be impossible with God." We run into a dead end, of course, if we attempt to turn Mary's part of the Advent drama into nothing more than a gynecological puzzle. What the angel announced to her, like hope itself, makes sense only if our surprising God is in the picture. The point of the story is remarkably clear but amazingly easy to miss if we insist on making it a scientific cipher: God can do what we cannot. When it seems there is no hope for the world, when violence and oppression seem to rule the day, God is at work doing the unexpected with the unnoticed; and, in God's good time, God will set us free. When it seems that our lives will be predictable, dull, and routine, God overwhelms us with the startling news that

we have been chosen for a unique purpose: through us God will bring something to life that will help and heal the world. When the conditions of life make it seem impossible for anything new to occur, God is still able to conceive new life, new love, and new possibility in us and in the world. Here is the center of Advent preaching: When hope is impossible with us, it is not impossible with God. *Nothing* is impossible with God!

Notes

1. "The New Prophets of Revelation," *Newsweek*, May 24, 2004.
2. Darby's hermeneutical scheme was adopted by Ellen White and early Seventh Day Adventists, widely-popularized by explanatory notes in the Scofield Reference Bible, and given a theological home at Dallas Theological Seminary. Dispensationalism has been on the bestseller list before, notably in the 1970s with Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).
3. Douglas John Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness: Toward an Indigenous Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 43f.
4. Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Fawcett Books, 1991); Robert H. Schuller, *Possibility Thinking* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993).
5. The general conclusion of such studies as Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam, 1995) and Martin E.P. Seligman *Learned Optimism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).
6. Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 16.
7. *Ibid*, 31.
8. *Theology of Hope*, 21.
9. The terms come from Glenn Tinder, *The Fabric of Hope*, Emory Studies in Law and Religion (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 80-94.
10. "Tremors of bliss" is T. S. Eliot's phrase, which Tinder quotes. *The Fabric of Hope*, 81.
11. *Ibid*, 86.
12. Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 144.
13. Molly T. Marshall, *Joining the Dance: A Theology of the Spirit* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 2003), 141.
14. Walter Brueggemann said, in his 1989 Beecher Lectures, that preachers offer "a poetic construal of an alternative world." See *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 6.