

# *Beyond Fear, Fundamentalism, and Fox News: The Active Hope of Advent*

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I have a friend who remembers the days when his wife and two small children were able to drop him off at LaGuardia Airport in New York and go outside on the deck to watch the plane depart. They would see their father board the plane, watch while the plane taxied down the runway, and then set their sights on the aircraft as it took off, growing smaller and smaller until it disappeared into the sky.

When the oldest child was about four, it came time for the whole family to take a trip on an airplane. He was unusually anxious as the day approached, full of energy and apprehension. After they had boarded the plane and buckled their seatbelts, he tightened up and began to scrunch up in his seat as the plane taxied down the runway.

“What are you doing, son?” his mother asked.

“I’m waiting to shrink and disappear.”

Many of us remember the days when we could laugh at our children’s fears—not to their faces, of course—but we knew there wasn’t a boogeyman under the bed, that eating broccoli would not cause trees to grow out of their ears. We would laugh silently, hold them tight, and remind them that there was nothing to fear.

In a post 9/11, post-Katrina, terror-filled world, it has become increasingly difficult for all of us, children and adults, to remain immune from feeling the kind of despair and fear that seems to permeate our culture. The principalities and powers have become quite adept at preying upon those fears. If a president mentions the “war on terror” enough times, all other issues are trumped. Homeland Security reinforces that fear as the colors change from orange to red. We are even told by certain religious leaders to fear gays and lesbians as *the* threat to the American family. Fear dominates the ethos of our time.

Advent arrives in the midst of despair and fear, for whether we read of the pathos-filled trust of those in exile, of a grizzled desert preacher who has come to “make straight the way of the Lord” (John 1:23), or of a stranger visiting a young girl with the preposterous news that “nothing is impossible with God” (Luke 1:37), we just might discover that we have nothing to fear *except* being untrue to what we believe is the meaning of our lives and central to our calling, which is the promise and hope of God.

Hope comes, not from the emperor, the scribe, the master technocrat, or the high priest, but rather from the God who works in and through historical anguish. To believe in an Advent hope is not to deny the despair or ignore the fear. It is to expect and watch without illusion. As a group of Campbell Scholars summarized it in their consensus paper,

The hope that is God’s gift to faith is therefore precisely *hope*—not sight, not inevitability, not finality. It must be grasped by the community of faith and by all who, from whatever sources of longing, imagination, and common grace, glimpse possibilities for what is *new*. It must become hope *in action*.<sup>1</sup>

*First Sunday in Advent: Isaiah 64:1-9*

In contrast to the merry, commercialized, computerized “ho-ho-ho’s” of the cash registers as early as October, Advent begins not with a festive carol of unadulterated joy and hope. Rather, it arrives slowly and ambiguously, from a people not privileged in the ways of the world, but exiled.<sup>2</sup> Instead of a carol extending the olive branch of peace, we hear Isaiah crying for the sword of justice.

To be a people in exile is, I believe, *the* apt metaphor to describe Christians in Western culture today who live over and against the contemporary cultural situation in which they (we) find themselves (ourselves).

Babylonians had swept down from the north, seized Jerusalem, destroyed the temple and now the once proud people who had understood their nation to be a nation blessed by God were humiliated, defeated, despairing, and fearful. Those who remained were reduced to eating dogs and rats; those who left became slaves to their captors in Babylon. The word is “exile” and it is not pretty. Of all their losses, the loss of their entire world of faith was most devastating. Yet this is precisely where Advent begins.

Isaiah knew that the journey from fear to hope began in remembering. “I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord” (Isaiah 63:7). That memory filled them with hope. But biblical memory is not to be confused with nostalgia, the way we might reminisce over Thanksgivings past during the final weekend of November. Things are never quite as good as we nostalgically remember. One of the early saints of the church once suggested that nostalgia should be numbered among the mortal sins! There might be some wisdom there, for the recurring homesickness for “the good ol’ days” can mortgage the possibilities of the future to the emotional engagements of the past.

Several years ago our family moved from Atlanta to Memphis, and in so doing I found an old box, long forgotten, that had all sorts of high school memorabilia, including old report cards and clippings from the newspaper about our basketball team of which I was a part. I found out that I wasn’t as good a basketball player as I had remembered! The average points per game had crept up during the decades. And I wasn’t as smart as I remembered either!

The problem with these exercises of nostalgia is that our memories record the sunny hours and make a hobby of invidious comparisons. As Bill Muehl writes, “No shore ahead is ever as beautiful as the recollection of one left unwillingly behind. No challenges are as stirring, no friends as loyal, no books as engrossing, and no teachers as profound as those enshrined to be young again.”<sup>3</sup>

Isaiah was not waxing sentimentally for the return of bygone days that never were. Remembering was not a panacea for the people of Israel. As a matter of fact, it actually opened up the wounds and led them to cry, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down” (Isaiah 64:1). As the poet continues, we see a people who simply expect God to be God, not unlike Abraham, Moses, Job, and others calling God to accountability. Most importantly (and terribly important to our contemporary exile!), they refused to find scapegoats. They refused to blame “the terrorists” or “the enemy” or “the judges” or “gays” or “liberals”... or “fundamentalists,” for that matter.

Rather, they repent. They confess that they are in such a mess that only God can help. They remember that they belong to God and only God. “We are all your people” (Isaiah 64:9b).

Such remembering reminds us that our *future* hope for a God who will come to bring justice and make things right is based on the *past* knowledge that God has already come, with mercy and healing.

*Second Sunday of Advent: Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8*

Advent continues with a people in exile and a person in the wilderness, but ever so slowly, despair and fear begin to yield to hopeful anticipation.

Most preachers (but particularly those of us who attended seminary in the 1960's and 1970's) began ministry with a mantra that almost achieved confessional status: "The job of the preacher is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." So it was that I arrived freshly ordained in a little Appalachian community forty-five minutes from nowhere with both prophetic and pastoral mantles in tow, ready to do just that: comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. There was only one problem: As I entered the lives of the people in that community, I couldn't tell who was comfortable and who was afflicted. To be sure, there were people in that poverty-stricken region who, on the outside, seemed quite comfortable. Coal mine operators, successful business owners, a few professionals. But it didn't take long to find that they had their own afflictions already: children on drugs, broken families, depression, a whole assortment of diseases, or entrapment in an unending cycle of a debilitating consumerism.

And for those whom society deemed afflicted? They had many, if not more, of the same afflictions as the so-called comfortable, but some possessed a peace I have rarely found elsewhere. Though they were poor and had been run roughshod over by "the system," I found that they provided *me* with comfort.

Isaiah's soothing words of comfort and John the Baptist's preaching a baptism of repentance stir up that existential pastoral crisis once again. There had been no word from the Lord in nearly two hundred years as the book of Isaiah is arranged, during which the exiles had voiced their fear and grief. "Zion stretches out her hands, but there is no one to comfort her....They heard how I was groaning, with no one to comfort me" (Lamentations 1:17, 21). Just as exile is a contemporary phenomenon, so too is Babylonian ideology, that which "sets the limits of what is possible and what is good, what is to be feared and what is to be trusted."<sup>4</sup> Though the preacher should be careful not to make simple comparisons between ideologies of antiquity and modernity, it would be hard to ignore Babylon's imperialistic militarism in today's world.

In response to the silence of God, the dehumanization of humans, and the groaning of the people, the prophet simply utters a word: "Comfort." It is a new and startling word. The God who seemed silent and submissive to the Babylonian gods will enable God's people to go home. All four Gospels use the imagery Isaiah employs here as John the Baptist presents the forthcoming ministry of Jesus as Good News for the exiled and displaced people of the world.

Further, it is a word of comfort *and* affliction. The God who is coming is God who comes "with might" (Isaiah 40:10) and afflicts the arrogance of the Babylonian gods with "good tidings," or "gospel." Fear and despair are no longer the dominant weapons to be used by the empire. Yet this God is also gentle and tender with those who have lived in fear and despair and have lost their way. "He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them..." (Isaiah 40:11). The people who came to hear John the Baptist quote Isaiah's vision were no less desperate for a new

word from God than those who had lived six hundred years earlier in Babylon. The Pax Romana was every bit as ideological and fear-inducing as Babylonian exile. “Comfort.” “Prepare.” Simple words, but words that point the way to the Word made flesh.

*Third Sunday of Advent: Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11; John 1:6-8, 19-28*

By the time Advent’s third Sunday is upon us there is a growing awareness that something new is indeed about to happen. Beyond fear lies the anticipation that hope and joy will be realities, yet we still must wait and behold the mystery, and that waiting is anything but passive. In W.H. Auden’s “For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio,” Herod the King, symbolizing the practical, reasonable nature of many of us in our time, says:

O God, put away justice and truth for we cannot understand them and do not want them. Eternity would bore us dreadfully. Leave the heavens and come down...Become our uncle. Look after Baby, amuse grandfather, escort Madam to the Opera, help Willy with his homework, and introduce Muriel to a handsome naval officer. Be interesting and weak like us, and we will love you as we love ourselves.<sup>5</sup>

Later, in exasperation, Herod explains:

I asked for a God who should be as like me as possible. What use to me is a God whose divinity consists in doing different things that I cannot do or saying clever things that I cannot understand? The God I want and intend to get must be someone I can recognize immediately without having to wait and see what he says or does. There must be nothing in the least extraordinary about him. Produce him at once, please. I’m sick of waiting.<sup>6</sup>

Yet wait we must. We must wait because we are not ready for the One who is to come. We *think* we are. The presents have been bought and wrapped. The choir has the cantata ready. The kids are beside themselves with energy, making parents more than ready. Yet we are not ready, for as Fred Craddock has reminded us: “In order to get to Bethlehem, you have to go through the wilderness. In order to get to Jesus, you have to go through John.”<sup>7</sup>

We are not ready because we are not aware of our condition, of how deeply we need One who is not a mere projection of ourselves, or our uncle. For it is John the Baptist, an active member of the covenant community, steeped in the prophetic tradition and well aware of how often the people demanded that their own kind be like their powerful neighbors; it is John who startles those gathered before him and startles us as well by pointing not to himself as the light, nor to our projections of who we think we need, but to mystery: “Among you stands one whom you do not know,” an element not found in last Sunday’s Markan account of John the Baptist.

A colleague of mine in a lectionary group once reminded us that “Lucifer” means “one who bears the light.” We think of demonic darkness and the light of Christ, yet Lucifer makes claims to light. Is it any coincidence that the age of reason has been called “the enlightenment?” Truth claims abound, from Rush Limbaugh to *Fox News* to the certainty of fundamentalists, to the Jesus Seminary searching for the historical

Jesus, to our own assumptions about who Jesus is, and they all fall short in the presence of mystery.

John the Baptist alone seems to know how alluring it is to claim the light for oneself. He tells know-it-alls that they know nothing at all, but he includes himself in that judgment. He bears witness to one “who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie” (John 1:27). Once again we are afflicted and disturbed by words of the prophet. We do not know the One who stands among us. But the comforting words that cast fear aside are that he *is* among us. He is to come, and we shall know him.

The Gospel becomes clearer. As Isaiah envisioned, the city will be restored, not by engineers, architects and contractors, but by the brokenhearted, captives, prisoners, and mourners. We shall know the One who comes in the name of the Lord as we work side by side with those who will do the rebuilding—the poor and the dispossessed.

Isaiah and John remind us that hope that is grounded in the power and mystery of the One who is to come is far different from the hope that we have grounded in ourselves and our claims to light and truth. As the contemporary prophet Vaclav Havel of the Czech Republic has written, “Humanity will have to go through many more Chernobyls and Rwandas before it understands how unbelievably shortsighted a human being can be who has forgotten that he [or she] is not God.”<sup>8</sup>

This third Sunday of Advent offers us an *active* hope, marked by humility, discernment, and mystery. We continue to wait and hope, looking for the One standing among us, that we might know him. Until then, we must beware of churches that claim to be enlightened, preachers who claim to have a corner on truth, governments that ignore the poor, and pundits who claim to know the answers. For the Jesus whom we await challenges them all.

#### *Fourth Sunday in Advent: Luke 1:26-38*

Abraham Heschel once suggested that humans do not live by needs alone, but by hopes, which we can barely articulate. “A person is what he [or she] hopes for.” And though we try to manufacture hopes with our busyness and cheerful yet unrealistic optimism, we find virtually all of our home-grown attempts to instill hope simply masquerade as hope, but do not fill the deep and profound need we so desperately await.

Today’s Gospel lesson seems far removed from a people in exile or a desert prophet. In contrast to the previous Sundays, the setting seems downright ordinary. Here is a young woman, perhaps as young as twelve, with the same basic hopes and expectations of any ordinary Jewish girl of that day: to marry, bear children, care for a household, work hard, and grow old.

There seems to be only one constant that connects this text with the previous texts we have examined. Once again, fear is present. “Do not be afraid, Mary” (Luke 1:30), the angel says. It is an ordinary fear that anyone might have when visited by angels, the same kind of fear that seems to permeate the birth narratives. The angel has spoken the same words to Zechariah (1:13), to Joseph (Matthew 1:18), and later to the shepherds (Luke 1:10). Fear is as much a part of our condition as the need for hope. Frederick Buechner suggests that Mary is not the only one in this scene to be trembling:

She struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all,

let alone this child, but he'd been entrusted with the message to give her, and he gave it...As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great, golden wings he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl.<sup>9</sup>

But Mary's fear seems different from our fears, which often lock the doors of our hearts to wonder. It is a holy fear that somehow keeps the heart open to mystery and hope, demonstrating that fear and faith can co-exist in the same human heart.

Gabriel had done his best to explain the unexplainable. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you" (Luke 1:35). The Holy Spirit gets us out of a lot of jams! Gabriel mentions Mary's cousin Elizabeth, as though conceiving in old age is equivalent to conceiving as a virgin, and then simply rests his case with the statement that most people of faith would have a hard time refuting: "Nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:37).

We don't know how long Gabriel had to wait for her answer. Luke implies that the answer came quickly, but Mary was always pondering things in her heart, and I like to think that even Gabriel had to wait in Advent. But after waiting, Mary spoke with a simplicity and depth few, if any, preachers can attain. "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your Word" (Luke 1:38). Kathleen Norris contrasts Mary's response with Zechariah's unbelief, which led to silence.

She does not lose her voice but finds it....she asserts herself before God, saying, "Here am I."...Mary proceeds—as we must do in life—making her commitment without knowing much about what it will entail or where it will lead. I treasure the story because it forces me to ask: "When the mystery of God's love breaks through into my consciousness, do I run from it? Do I ask of it what I cannot answer? Shrugging, do I retreat into facile clichés, the popular false wisdom of what "we all know"? Or am I virgin enough to respond from my deepest, truest self, and say something new, a "yes" that will change me forever?"<sup>10</sup>

William Sloane Coffin has throughout his ministry reminded us that the opposite of love is not hate, but fear. "Perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). To live an Advent hope is not to live in denial that the fears are not real. There is plenty to fear, and the principalities and powers thrive on exploiting those fears. Nor is it to live in passive resignation without claiming responsibility for that hope.

Perhaps as we approach the manger and hold perfect love, love divine, in our arms, our fear might be a holy fear, full of wonder, mystery, and surprise. For we see that nothing is impossible with God, not even a young woman giving birth in which the outpouring of divine love and a distilling of human love is found in a child.

The waiting is almost over, but through our waiting we have found meaning, fashioned from our hope in the One who has indeed come. He lives within us, as he lived within an ordinary girl in an ordinary town years ago. And we find that our despair and fear are no matches for a God for whom nothing will be impossible.

As I close, our church, along with countless others, is helping to re-settle evacuees from New Orleans following the devastation of Katrina. We saw after 9/11 how fear produced anxiety and defensiveness, which led to increasing violence and tribalism. Katrina has exposed something about our society that we have tried hard to deny: who

suffers the most, especially in wartime. The very week the hurricane hit, the U.S. Census poverty report came out, showing that poverty had risen for the fourth straight year with 37 million Americans below the poverty line. They were among the ones stuck in New Orleans.

There is plenty to fear, particularly for those who are poor and black. But there is still the promise of God. Perhaps the word we need to hear above all on this day is what the angel said to Mary, words that were repeated years later at an empty tomb: “Do not be afraid.”

#### Notes

1. Walter Brueggeman, ed., *Hope for the World* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 17.
2. Scholars are divided as to whether or not this text was actually written during the exile or following the exile. Nonetheless, it is about the devastating experience of being exiled from home. For a post-exilic interpretation, see Jon L. Bergquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1995).
3. William Muehl, *All the Damned Angels* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Pilgrim Press, 1972), 100-101.
4. Walter Brueggeman, *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 14.
5. W. H. Auden, “For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio,” *Collected Longer Poems* (New York: Random House, 1969), 187.
6. *Ibid.*, 188.
7. I first heard Dr. Craddock make this claim in a workshop in the 1980's. I am sure it is in one of his sermons somewhere, but I cannot find the source.
8. Cited by James M. Wall in “True Confessions,” *Christian Century* (November 20-27, 1996), 1131.
9. Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who* (San Francisco, Calif.: Harper & Row, 1979), 39.
10. Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books 1998), 76-77.