

Preaching the Advent Texts

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Advent is a particularly dicey season in which to preach. It is one of those times in the life of the church when the purposefully minor-key melody line of lectionary-based worship and preaching is in danger of being drowned out by the raucous background noise of popular culture. It is played out against the backdrop of conspicuous consumerism which, by the time Advent actually rolls around, has already engorged church people with a whole year's worth of Christmas elevator music, window decorations, bell-ringing Salvation Army Santa Clauses, daily arrivals in the mail of yet more slick four-color catalogues, and sidewalk smells of chestnuts roasting on open fires.

Rarely is the church called upon to be more countercultural than during Advent. Rarely is there a greater disconnect between the church's hopes and secular sentiments, as people step from the surrounding cacophonies into quiet sanctuaries that display the hues of purple or deep blue rather than red and green and are invited (somewhat grudgingly) to mark time—carefully and deliberately—toward a destination, finally, that is on a horizon more distant than December 25. Rarely, as any pastor knows, do the worshippers in our churches settle altogether happily for “Prepare the Way, O Zion” instead of “Silent Night” or “Joy to the World.”

Advent, after all, is a season in which text struggles annually with context and thus lifts up the contemporary tensions between our church and its attendant culture. The good news, though, in this Advent season, is that the preacher has a sympathetic companion in Matthew the gospel-writer. More than any other New Testament gospel, Matthew addresses a church that was at many points analogous to ours. It was an urban church. (On multiple occasions, Matthew takes out Mark's word “village” and replaces it with “city.”) It was a pluralistic church, both Jewish-Christian and Gentile-Christian in composition. It was a fairly wealthy church, one with its own ambiguous relationship to culture. If we take the time in our Advent sermon preparations to tell Matthew about our people and the challenges they face, chances are that he will understand. And traveling together with us through Advent, chances are he will introduce us to a Jesus who exhorts and challenges us and our people too, with his own minor-key melody line, which will be heard—in both an ironic contrast and a majestic harmony—with the elegant notes offered by the prophet Isaiah.

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

It ends with God. At the hands of our lectionary, Matthew's Jesus wastes no time getting to his first exhortation and challenge to us. It is to remind us that the One Whom we most properly await in Advent is not the baby boy born in a barn, but the Son of Man Who is coming to meet us at the end of time. Hence in this text for the First Sunday of Advent, as in Mark's and Luke's texts in other years, the scale of things is appropriately cosmic and the tone is apocalyptic. Christians in Matthew's time were embarrassed by the delay of the Son of Man's return and received considerable scoffing from their theological opponents. Matthew, therefore, wanted them, and us,

to acknowledge the uncertainty of the Son of Man's coming and to urge a faith stance of constant watchfulness in the meantime. "But about that day and hour no one knows, says Jesus in Matthew's gospel, "neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."¹

This way of dealing with "the delay of the Parousia" forges a union between eschatology and ethics² and has shaped mainline Christian theology ever since. To believe that, as Isaiah puts it, "the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains..."³; and to believe that the Son of Man is coming some day to gather up and redeem all of the brokenness and loose ends of the world and of our lives is to mean—in the meantime—that our lives have purpose and direction. As Tom Long put it, "If the dam twenty minutes upstream breaks, then the Rembrandt on the wall is less valuable than the rubber raft in the attic."⁴ Knowing what lies ahead clarifies what to value, and not value, now.

Years ago I knew of a prominent African-American pastor who served a large and powerful church in Harlem, above 125th Street in New York City. From its gothic spire, one could see just about anything one would want to see. Or, to put it more accurately, one could see just about everything one would *not* want to see: blocks of burned-out buildings, shabby little pawn shops and boarded-up storefronts and roach-infested grocery stores, in the shadows of which prostitutes and crack dealers plied their trades. Many churches had given up and moved elsewhere, but that church just continued to hang in there—keeping watch, staying alert, as if every moment mattered! They organized a locally-owned bank (so the neighborhood could *have* a bank), they set up latch-key programs for children, they put together neighborhood redevelopment agencies, they set up Bible studies in high-rises, they conducted successful boycotts against price-gouging corporations. But still, it was Harlem.

A newspaper reporter once interviewed this pastor. "Sure," he said as he framed one question, "you're doing great stuff. But it's hard to see what difference any of that is making. What enables you and your folks to keep going?" The pastor said, "We've read the Bible, and we know how it ends. We aren't at the end yet," he went on, "but we know how it ends, and that's what makes the difference."

We, too, know how it ends, don't we? It ends with God! And so, with our people, we return on the First Sunday of Advent to worship one in whose presence we are wrenched away from the world as it is in order to get a view of the world as it might be. A holy power keeps shaping us by the waters of the font and keeps feeding us the bread and the cup of the table; and, time after time, we remember how it all ends and therefore what's finally important about our lives in the meantime.

Keep awake, therefore, for you know how it ends.

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

The surprise entrance. When it comes to comedy, there's a whole genre that has built up around the surprise entrance. We all know of those actors and comedians who have perfected the completely jarring way in which they step onto the set and reduce us all to laughter.

In those old "Bob Newhart Show" reruns, for example, the pristine parlor of a colonial New England inn looks like it's ready for a group of people straight out of the "Land's End" catalogue to stand around the inviting fireplace sipping hot apple cider. Suddenly the front door swings open, and in step three mountain men desperately

needing baths and haircuts, wearing dirty green fatigues and ski caps with holes in them, and carrying an ominous box in which there's probably a reptile. Then comes the classic line—"Hi, I'm Larry, and this is my brother Daryl, and this is my other brother Daryl!"—and the audience roars with appreciation.

It's the same way in those "Seinfeld" reruns, when Kramer bursts into Jerry's apartment looking like he's just been unplugged from some wall outlet. As he slides across the threshold and into each episode, everybody applauds.

There is great humor in the surprise entrance! But the test for us on the Second Sunday of Advent is to discern what's funny about the surprise entrance in this text from Matthew. The temptation is to think that it's John the Baptist who's so funny—all hairy and unshaven and bedecked in animal skins as he munches on insects. Granted, he crashes the dignity of our worship, and we are startled enough—by his entrance, by his wardrobe, and by his message—to laugh. But maybe, in the final analysis, it's his uptight audience that is funnier.

Something similarly humorous literally happened, in fact, on the Second Sunday of Advent last year in the church that we attend in Austin. The service had just started and was being led by one of our Associate Pastors. The other Associate Pastor, her colleague, stomped into the chancel—wearing, in addition to his alb and stole, a black, long-haired Cher wig, and carrying a shepherd's crook—shouting "Prepare the way of the Lord!" at the top of his voice. "Hi," he said to her as he approached, "I'm John the Baptist!" "And I'm Judy the Presbyterian!" she responded. We loved the surprise entrance and the dialogue, and we laughed out loud as they continued through the rest of the unexpected skit.

It wasn't really the ridiculously clever approximation of John the Baptist that I was laughing at in that exchange. It was instead, I believe, the universe of assumptions wrapped up in the retort, "I'm Judy the Presbyterian." We Presbyterians, after all, are often quite taken with our pedigrees, our theological credentials, our heady customs—so much so that maybe we assume Heaven will be a lot like a graduate school for religion in Geneva, Edinburgh or Charlotte. In this sense, maybe we are a lot like the Pharisees and Sadducees of Matthew's day. They, too, are so wrapped up in their theological credentials—their kinship to Abraham, the notion that the faith is theirs by birthright—that they are unable to envision a future that God may be opening up to them through none less than that bizarre and surprising Baptizer named John.

But John is in fact challenging them to *envision* and *grow into* a different future—a future that assumes an inherited tradition, for sure, but that also recapitulates it in the light of one who is to come. John's job is to prepare us for that one. "I baptize you with water for repentance," he says, "but one who is more powerful than I am is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."⁵

Sometimes we see evidence of how the future available through that one recapitulates and re-orientates all that has gone before. Once, while living in Atlanta, I took a tour of a remarkable and historic building. In the nineteenth century it had been known as the Atlanta Stockade—a prison with walls that were four feet thick and impermeable with their steel-reinforced concrete. Debtors were sent there to work off their debt; some were never heard from again. It was a dreaded place in its early years—a breeding-ground for tuberculosis and syphilis and the cruelest forms of inhumanity. Then, sometime well into the twentieth century, it was abandoned; and

over several decades it became a haven for drugs and crime and all sorts of unsavory behavior. But a little more than ten years ago, some faith-filled visionaries saw the possibilities of what that building could be, and they began turning those possibilities into reality. By the day of my tour, it had been successfully transformed into an attractive, modern complex filled with apartments and amenities and services for people who had once been homeless. What had earlier been a prison had been transformed into a marvelous locus of Christian hospitality!

That is a kind of repentance. An inherited tradition is recapitulated in the light of new information. Isaiah's vision of "a shoot [coming] out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch [growing] out of his roots" is now given new shape by a strange intruder fresh from the wilderness. A different future is on the way, he says. A time—our time—is being redeemed by the light of a holy surprise drawing near. And all of a sudden, the landscape of life changes. This is the surprising word of John, whose message is: "Prepare the way of the Lord!"

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

The right kind of eyesight. In this text, we see John beginning to doubt his own message. In prison now, in a setting where his message has brought dire consequences for himself, he is beginning to question the effectiveness of the one whose coming he had earlier proclaimed so exuberantly. Backing off of his previous confidence, he sends a message to Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"⁶ Some may thus be disappointed in John, clucking disapprovingly over his lack of staying power. For others, though, this may be a new moment to take John seriously.

These words of commentary on this text are being written as the secret doubts of Mother Theresa, as recorded in her diaries, are being revealed to the world. This dedicated nun who, in life, gave herself away to the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, and who, in death, is on a fast-track toward being declared a saint by the Catholic Church, may also be disappointing some people with the posthumous revelation of her serious doubts about God. For me, though, this new information only makes her more extraordinary. A new element of her humanity has been uncovered, and she—and her tenacious faith—become somehow more accessible to me. No longer is she so much larger than life that I cannot successfully relate to her. I now see her as one who struggled with some of the same impediments to faith that I struggle with—the daily evidence of poverty and greed and inequity and apathy and self-questioning that seem to refute the claims we make about God's presence in the world.

I feel the same way about John, nursing his doubts there in prison. Moreover, I am encouraged by Jesus' response to him—and to me. Jesus invites John—and the rest of us—to cultivate the right kind of eyesight with which to see his project taking shape in the world. It is eschatological eyesight. Without it, we end up using the kind of eyesight that the world is more comfortable using to gauge the effectiveness of our faith claims. We end up determining a church's health or a denomination's health, for example, simply by assessing its size, by its worship attendance, by its budget, by the number of powerful people involved in it, by how successful it is at keeping the peace by looking the other way and muzzling its own voice. For the sake of the world, we in the church so desperately need the right kind of eyesight. Without it, we get discouraged in a heartbeat. But with it, we are able to see, amid the apparent setbacks

and struggles of people of faith, the emerging presence of the Kingdom of God. When Jesus sent word back to John—“the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them”⁷—he wasn’t just cataloguing his previous day’s to-do list. Nor was he just quoting Isaiah: “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped....”⁸ Most important, he was encouraging John to cultivate an eschatological eyesight to see past what is yet unfinished in our world in order to catch a glimpse of the Kingdom of God drawing near.

A few years ago, near the end of the twentieth century, some people in the Presbyterian denomination pulled out their calculators and assessed things from a certain angle and then went public with a startling prediction. Influenced by all the literature about the decline of the mainline church, they predicted that if present trends continued, Presbyterians would become virtually non-existent sometime in the twenty-first century. They put this prediction in what they thought was a particularly clever way. They said that, if present trends continued, Presbyterians would become “the Amish of the twenty-first century.” It was a way of saying that, for all practical purposes, Presbyterians would be marginalized and irrelevant, as if we were horse-and-buggy people—totally out of date and rendered invisible by our irrelevance in a world that had totally eclipsed us. I saw that prediction made in print, I heard it repeated at this or that meeting, and whenever that prediction was voiced—“the Amish of the twenty-first century”—people laughed at that thought so cleverly put.

Then, in the fall of 2006, we all watched as one particular Amish community in Pennsylvania—in the midst of grieving over and burying a group of their own schoolchildren who had been slaughtered by a rage-filled man with a gun that he finally turned on himself—paused nonetheless to send a delegation to reach out to and financially support the widow and family of the one who had done the slaughtering. We watched in open-mouthed disbelief as they summoned a strength that ultimately was impossible, humanly speaking, and then dealt with the sin and tragedy that had penetrated their world by beholding it all with the right kind of eyesight. We watched as they returned love for evil, as they reached out in healing and redemption. We watched in complete awe as they directed our gaze, if we had the eyesight ourselves to see it, toward a light shining in the darkness that the darkness—try as it might—could not overcome.

And, speaking for myself, I would be pleased for any church in the twenty-first century to be compared to that witness. I would praise God if our church, too, could be compared favorably with people who see the world—dark and threatening and incomplete and full of terror as it often is—with that kind of eyesight.

That would be more good news for John—and for us.

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

In defense of Joseph. As this text from Matthew rolls around again this year, I find myself focusing this time around not upon Mary or the angel or dreams or the etymology of the name “Jesus” or Matthew’s penchant to link Old Testament prophecy with events in the life of Christ and the early church or any of the other clever angles that have interested me in the past. This year I am interested in the one who is self-evidently the main character in this text, Joseph. But rummaging around in that vast closet in which the Christian church for twenty centuries has stored its Christmas

trappings, I find hardly a thing on Joseph.

Look in a hymnal, for example, and try to find one hymn in which Joseph plays anything more than a bit-part. There's a lot of "Gentle Mary laid her child, lowly in a manger," or "What child is this who, laid to rest, on Mary's lap is sleeping?," or "Born in the night, Mary's child, a long way from your home; coming in need, Mary's child, born in a borrowed room." Everywhere you look, it's Mary this and Mary that! What is Joseph—a potted plant? It's not fair! And, when there is a hymn about Joseph, it's a hatchet job. Take that ancient carol, "The Cherry Tree Carol." Joseph is walking in a cherry orchard with Mary, who is great with child. Mary meekly asks Joseph to pick a cherry from one of the trees for her, and he responds gruffly: "Let him pluck thee a cherry that brought thee now with child." In other words, ask the guy who got you in this situation to pick fruit for you. And then, just to thoroughly humiliate Joseph, Jesus, so the carol goes, issues a command from his mother's womb that the tallest tree in the orchard bow down before her so that poor Mary can pick as many cherries as she can stomach.⁹

So it goes for old Joseph. Here and there, he has emerged from obscurity to carry some ideological torch or other. In the nineteenth century, when people went about applying the political and economic philosophies of Karl Marx, a new church in some industrial community would occasionally get named "The Church of St. Joseph the Worker." But for the most part, Joseph is the Rodney Dangerfield of the Christmas story—one who suffers at the hands of the church either from complete slander or utter disregard, one who has practically fallen off the map of the church's devotional life.

Why are we so down on Joseph? Perhaps, in part, it's that we have consolidated the Christmas story into one seamless cut of cloth and have assigned every character a carefully-scripted role to play. Shepherds and wise men and choirs of angels get to make big entrances onto the scene, and, by comparison, there's no terribly essential role for Joseph. He's just not an easy fit. Give him some tools and say, "Joseph, go plug those leaks so the place won't be so drafty." Give him the car keys and say, "Joseph, go to the 7-11 and buy some diapers and some Similac." But really, as things stand in our consolidated version of this story, there's not much for him to do. He's awkwardly placed in the little creches around our homes at Christmas—bending stiffly down on one knee as he looks at the baby in the manger, trying to be sensitive. Whatever our reasons, he's the fall guy.

Maybe more significantly, we're down on Joseph because, from the standpoint of our culture with its high regard for radical individualism, he appears so tepid and benignly compromising in the way he deals with Mary's dilemma. When Mary's pregnancy is revealed, Matthew says that he "planned to dismiss her quietly." Dismiss her quietly! That sounds so unheroic! What we want is a Joseph who will be a sort of Leonardo deCaprio who will thumb his nose at the social conventions and whisk Mary away to a place where they can be who they are meant to be. So we don't forgive Joseph for his apparent reluctance to play his part in this story with more single-minded enthusiasm.

This means that we have hardly begun to understand this remarkable man and the way in which the whole story of Christmas, and all that happens thereafter, hinges upon him. The Joseph and Mary whom we encounter here in Matthew's first chapter are "betrothed" but not living together. "Betrothal" in ancient Palestine meant more than "engagement" does in our setting. Through "betrothal" a woman was "bound" to a

man through formal words of consent, and it was often arranged when the woman was still but a young girl, maybe not yet a teenager. Even though she did not yet live with the man, she was viewed already by society as the man's wife, and it could be years before the woman betrothed to the man moved out of her family's house and into the home—and the bed—of her husband. And just here—somewhere between betrothal and marriage—is where Joseph and Mary are.

Joseph, as Matthew tells us, is “a righteous man,” which means that he is utterly devoted to keeping the commandments of God. Here is where the problems start. For when Mary is found to be pregnant and Joseph knows he's not the father, he knows from the Scout handbook of religious righteousness just what he has to do. According to the law—to which he is righteously committed—he must turn her out or even put her to death. The problem for Joseph is that he's both compassionate and righteous. Because he's compassionate, he will quietly release Mary from the bonds of betrothal. But because he's righteous, he will not ignore the law.

Just here is where the story of Joseph and Mary takes a surprising turn. An angel appears to Joseph in a dream and reveals to him that what looks like a moral outrage is in fact, a holy disruption. “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife,” the angel says, “for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰ We can practically hear in the background Handel's setting of the Old Testament text for this day: “Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.”¹¹ In the purposefulness of God, this righteous man Joseph shall be a genealogical bridge, thus bequeathing to Jesus the family name of the house of David. And just as important, as a bridge between all of the religious heritage that *has been* and the evolving thing that God is doing in the world *now*, Joseph will break through the confines of the old law in order to respond obediently to God's new act in this mysterious one whose name will be Jesus.

What an amazing thing—that this man who has always seen righteousness as a matter of coloring inside the lines now accepts the promise of that angel and takes Mary as his wife. Thus Joseph becomes the primary example, here at the beginning of Matthew's gospel, for true righteousness and faithful discipleship. Hardly the fall guy at all, he is the keystone in the bridge that is built by the Christmas story. Because he is willing to be such a link between old and new, between past and present, everything in the drama of Jesus Christ that will unfold from this moment hinges upon this one man and his righteousness.¹²

It's a righteousness not unlike the greater righteousness which God calls us to through Jesus Christ our Lord. It is something begun in love, and while it regularly shatters what we know and leaves us stepping out into some new unknown on not much more than sheer faith, the promise is that it can only—*will* only—lead to good. The one who is to come to save us from ourselves will call us from the Scout handbooks by which we try to live and move and have our being. The one who is to come will lead us from that about the law which does not liberate and only absorbs the self, and toward the whole offering of ourselves unto God. The one who is to come will beckon us from our own worst errors and bad decisions and chronic sins, and toward the truly righteous people God would have us be—a people whose righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees, whose righteousness, when all is said and done, approaches that of Joseph.¹³

Notes

- 1 Matthew 24:36, New Revised Standard Version.
- 2 I am grateful here for the insights of David E. Garland, *A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 346-347.
- 3 Isaiah 2:2.
- 4 Tom made this remark during a discussion of this text at the meeting of the Moveable Feast cohort, meeting in Holmes, New York, in January 1992.
- 5 Matthew 3:11.
- 6 Matthew 11:3.
- 7 Matthew 11:5.
- 8 Isaiah 35:5.
- 9 From *The Oxford Book of Carols* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948).
- 10 Matthew 1:21.
- 11 Isaiah 7:14.
- 12 I was assisted in this section by the exegetical work of Thomas G. Long, in his book *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 12-14.
- 13 I am grateful in this approach to the Rev. Christine Chakoian, pastor of the Lake Forest, Illinois, Presbyterian Church, whose insights from an unpublished paper presented once at a meeting of the Moveable Feast cohort influenced greatly my work on this text.