

Advent: Departure and Homecoming

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Advent, more than any other season in the church year, is most powerfully contradicted by the socioeconomic practices of our society. That is why Advent preaching is so difficult and why we are tempted to cheat and slide over into Christmas as soon as we can. It is exceedingly difficult to live in the tension and maintain the tension between Advent and “early Christmas” in a consumer culture.

In fact, Advent still belongs to the Old Testament and is preoccupied with the hopes of Israel that have not yet come to fruition. There is a *waiting* that is required, and a summons to wait with *discipline*. But our Advent preaching must be done in a culture of instant gratification that wants to wait for nothing, a self-indulgent culture that resists any inconvenient discipline. The consumer orgy that has come to dominate Christmas shopping is the most vulgar form of “realized eschatology”; it imagines we *have it all now*. Consequently there is nothing yet to receive and nothing for which to hope. But Advent is the insistence that “coming soon” is the great “plus” of the newness that is “at hand” but not yet visible. In the Church season, there is a wait until Christmas, for the time when “the wondrous gift is given.” In Advent that wondrous gift is “at hand”...but not yet in hand. Thus I suggest that Advent preaching is about *hope* in a culture that attempts to fend off its despair by frantic self-indulgent busyness that is determined to work itself into a frazzle; that frazzle serves a) to keep from hoping and b) to keep from the hopelessness that saturates our common polity.

I

The Old Testament/Hebrew Bible is a Book of Hope that has received various fulfillments in Jewish and Christian tradition. In a notorious way, Rudolf Bultmann has argued, from an acute Christological stance, that by itself the Old Testament does not reach fulfillment, i. e., that it awaits Jesus. It is true that the Old Testament awaits fulfillment, though one need not (and must not) cast that reality in Bultmann’s supersessionist terms. We may do better to pay attention to the ending of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible as it is given in two quite different shapes.

On the one hand, the Jews have a particular ordering for the Hebrew canon, and it ends with 1 and 2 Chronicles, culminating with the decree of the Persian ruler, Cyrus:

In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in fulfillment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom and also declared in a written edict: “Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him! Let him go up.” (2 Chron 36:22-23)

It is noteworthy, in passing, that even the decree of the foreign ruler is linked to

prophetic hope in an allusion to Jeremiah 50:9, a connection that subsumes even imperial policies under the rule of YHWH.¹

In that rendering, the culmination of Jewish Scripture is the permit of Cyrus who has been “stirred up” by YHWH. That decree allowed displaced Jews to go home and resume life in the territory of Judah, amid Jerusalem. That is a powerful hope that eventuated—through Ezra and Nehemiah—in the restoration movement of Judaism. Of this culminating promise, we may notice four matters:

1. The promise is exclusively for Jews. The restoration of Judaism is the final hope of the text. Indeed, Jon Levenson in his important book has recently connected “resurrection faith” and “God’s ultimate victory” to the “restoration of Israel.”²
2. The hope is a political/historical one made with reference to the political-imperial decision on the part of the Persian Empire.
3. The hope is concretely material and concerns land. This sort of promise continues to play in the contemporary state of Israel and in the hope for the reestablishment of Jerusalem. But we should not miss the theological angle: land claims are linked to the larger purpose and will of YHWH with particular reference to Jews.
4. Perhaps most important, the Hebrew canon culminates with a literature of hope in the Persian period. Indeed Old Testament scholarship is now largely preoccupied with the Persian period of Israel’s memory.³ There are, to be sure, some pieces of literature in the Old Testament that are later than the Persian period in the Hellenistic era. But they are not defining for the hope of Judaism. In the Book of Daniel that is judged critically to be set in the Hellenistic period, moreover, the memory in the text is situated in the time of Nebuchadnezzar in the sixth century. Historical location fixes Jewish hope in the Hebrew Bible to that time and place.

On the other hand, Christians have their own ordering for the books of the Old Testament, which enunciate a very different hope in its conclusion. I have noted the Cyrus decree in 2 Chronicles 36:22-23 because I have wanted to contrast that final articulation of hope with the final hope voiced in the Christian Old Testament in Malachi 4:5-6. It is of enormous significance that the Hebrew Bible ends in *imperial decree*, for Jews are always living amid empire; it is equally significant that the Christian Old Testament ends with a *prophetic oracle*, an act of imagination and expectation that is propelled not by political analysis, but by divine promise that surges beyond *Realpolitik*. I do not for an instant suggest that the latter articulation is a superior one, only that it is very different.

The Christian Old Testament ends with a divine promise that Elijah will return with the capacity to reconcile parents and children (Mal 4:5-6). This concluding oracle thus attests that God is not finished, that God intends reconciliation in time to come, and that God will authorize human agency (Elijah) to accomplish that reconciliation. We may read the Elijah promise backward and forward.

When we read the Elijah promise back to 1 Kings 17-21, we arrive at this narrative character who had the courage and authority to challenge kings, override death, evoke rain, and make all things new. He is an uncredentialed agent who subverts royal authority and puts his authority to work against the rapacious policies of establishment economics. It is astonishing that the Old Testament ends with a divine assurance that this unsettling, subversive agent will reappear in time to come in order to overcome the alienations of family and society. (The Jews as well, at Passover, anticipate the coming again of Elijah).

When we read this promise forward into the New Testament, we arrive at John the Baptist who is the key character in the drama of Advent and the last character in the Old Testament. The gospel writers do not spend much energy linking John to Elijah, but the connection is quite explicit in Luke 1:8-17 where the angel announces the birth of John: "With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." (Luke 1:17)

In this part of the angelic enunciation, there is a direct allusion to the promise of Malachi, but that promise is now expanded in explicit ways. John, soon to be born, will turn the hearts of parents to the children; will turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, and will make ready a people prepared for YHWH.

The exposition of the Malachi offered by Luke has both modified and extended the expectation in order to draw closer to John.

In addition to this explicit linkage, two advent texts in this year's common lectionary reference John. In Matthew 3:1-12, the Gospel reading for the Second Sunday in Advent, John is described as an uncredentialed outsider who enters into dispute with Jewish leadership (Pharisees and Sadducees). He speaks harsh words of judgment, urges repentance, and dismisses their claims of pedigree. Then he announces the one "coming after me" which will *gather* the wheat and *burn* the chaff. That is, he anticipates one who will sort out who is qualified to be the "new people," the ones prepared, gathered around the new leader.

The second reading is Matthew 11:2-11, the gospel reading for the Third Sunday in Advent, which ends (in verses excluded from the lectionary) that "he is Elijah who is to come" (v. 14). In this narrative account John claims his role as prophet whose work is to proclaim the coming one. John's assertion is in the wake of Jesus' message to him about Jesus as a transformative agent who makes all things new:

Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." (Matt 11:4-6)

The interface of John and Jesus, so well articulated here, consists in (a) John's *demanding preparation* and (b) Jesus' *performance of newness*. Clearly the account in Matthew intends that the two, John and Jesus, prophetic voice and transformative agent, cannot be separated from each other any more than they can be confused with each other. In this rendering, John is the teacher who guides preparation so that "a people prepared" may receive the newness. But the newness of Jesus, reported back to John, is not the news of consumer goods or security or self-indulgence or any of the matters that constitute our usual "Christmas season." Rather the newness that is promised and enacted is the rehabilitation of human well being among the disabled and the disinherited...the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf, the dead, and the poor. It is as though John, counting on the declaration of Jesus, is seeking to change the subject away from conventional desires to the gifts of the new regime that concern the most elemental human possibilities of health, healing, and wholeness, all of which require wrenching transformation out of old settled conventions. I suggest that Advent preaching might indeed focus on *change the subject*, away from much of our usual agenda. If we begin with John and read backward (even as Matthew 11:2-11 begins

with Jesus and reads back to John), we read back to Malachi and the promise of reconciliation; if we read back from Malachi to Elijah, we understand why Elijah is identified as “troubler” in Israel (1 Kgs 18:17) and “my enemy” (1 Kgs 21:20). The force of Elijah’s ministry was a huge “trouble” to settled power in Israel. And now John—via Malachi—anticipates the coming time when Jesus comes to heal and transform.

We are able to recall that Jesus’ adversaries resisted his healing power. As soon as he healed, they sought to destroy him, because present power arrangements thrive on social relationships of disability that foster fear, anxiety, exploitation, and violence (Mark 3:6). A change of subject toward the gifts of health, healing, and wholeness exposes conventional modes of management as fraudulent and pathological. What Elijah, Malachi, John, and Jesus discovered is that most of their hearers have an enormous stake in the way things are and resent the cost and refuse the disciplines of a changed agenda. What a way to imagine Advent preaching as a changed subject that calls attention to social possibilities that we would rather not notice. Preparation consists in receiving new agenda, and that cannot happen through conventional busyness that our society practices in order to keep from facing the new agenda.

II.

If we take John the Baptist as the key character in Advent and as the last character in the Old Testament, then we may notice one other remarkable matter about John in the narrative. It is this: in all four Gospels, when John announces the coming Messiah, he quotes verses from Isaiah 40:

This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,
“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.” (Matt 3:3)⁴

* * *

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’” (Mark 1:2-3)

* * *

As it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,
“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’” (Luke 3:4-6)

* * *

He said,
"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
'Make straight the way of the Lord,'"
as the prophet Isaiah said. (John 1:23)

The quotes from Isaiah 40 serve different purposes in each of these four citations. But given such differences in nuance, it is nonetheless the case that the commonality of quotation is a defining feature of John's message, and so a defining note of Advent.

We may linger a while to ponder why it is that John appealed to these verses, and why it is that the gospel writers all embrace that common memory. What does it mean to have exposition of Jesus drawn into the orbit of Isaiah 40?

As is well known among us, Isaiah 40 begins the second part of the Book of Isaiah that stands in deep tension with Isaiah 1-29. (The material is well known in Handel's *Messiah* and is commonly referred to as "Second Isaiah.") Isaiah 40 would seem to be an utterance that is situated at the beginning of the Persian Empire under Cyrus (about 540 B.C.E.) and stands historically remote from Isaiah 39 that concluded the first part of the Book of Isaiah. Isaiah 39 concerns Hezekiah and reflects time about 690 B.C.E. This means that the time between Isaiah 39 and Isaiah 40 (690...540 B.C.E.) is about 150 years. It is as though the faithful have waited 150 years for this poetic utterance. In that 150 years a great deal has happened to the city of Jerusalem on which Isaiah reflects, the destruction of the city and the displacement of its leading inhabitants.

In Isaiah 39:5-7, the prophet announced that the leading members of the Jerusalem establishment, including members of the royal family, will be carried away into exile. Then, after 150 years of silence and waiting, the Isaiah tradition speaks again to announce a homecoming to those who have been displaced as exiles. The poetry of Isaiah 40:1-11 purports to be a decision made in the heavenly realm of the gods about the deployment of new political reality on earth. The text:

asserts God's pardon for punished Jerusalem (vv. 1-2);
imagines a highway that will permit displaced Jews to return home in splendor (vv. 3-4);
asserts that God's promissory word is reliable (vv. 8-9);
commissions a messenger to announce "gospel news" to those who have been displaced (v. 9);
offers a summary of the good news, "Here is your God" (v. 9);
presents God as the protector on the journey home, God as powerful warrior, God as gentle shepherd (vv. 10-11).

The sum of the poetry is the announcement that YHWH, God of Israel, is now back in action after a long season of dismay. That new divine action is the emancipation of Jews for homecoming so that they may depart the Babylonian empire and return home to well-being in Jerusalem. We know from elsewhere that this act of emancipation was accomplished by Cyrus the Persian who defeated Babylon and who is termed "Messiah" in the Isaiah poetry (Isa 45:1; see 44:28 as well). It is to be noted that this is the same Cyrus who issued the decree in 2 Chronicles 36:22-23.

In the gospel narrative it is of course obvious that John, in early Christian reading, is assigned the role of the messenger in Isaiah 40 who will prepare the procession home. While John quotes only these verses in chapter 40, it is clear that his task pertains

to the whole of the text of Isaiah concerning *departure* from Babylon and *homecoming* to Jerusalem. In this usage John (and the early church) transposed the poetry in order to apply to a first century crisis of faith. The message is still one of emancipation and homecoming for Jews who had been alienated and marginalized both by Hellenistic culture and Roman governance. The message is still that *departure and homecoming* are to be accomplished by human agency, now Jesus of Nazareth. This is the good news made possible because of YHWH's empowerment and authorization of emancipatory human agency. John announces nothing less than the end of the power of the old regime and the emergence of a new rule embodied in Jesus.

The New Testament is capable of readily transposing texts into new contexts, drawing the text close to new crisis. John anticipates that Jesus will enact all of the hopes that Jews held in the first century, in order to recover the freedom and dignity of their Jewishness that had been diminished in a sociopolitical environment that was hostile to Jewishness. The recovery, moreover, is seen as an act of human rehabilitation, with reference to Matthew 11, concerning the many who await restoration and have no hope. Thus an advent text, placed at the beginning of the gospel narrative, may have been heard by first century listeners as news about recovered political status, economic possibility, and healthy theological identity. The transposition from Babylon to Rome is an act of imagination that the early church readily makes in its reutilization of Old Testament texts.

III.

It remains now to consider how the advent theme of *changed subject*, the character of *John the Baptist* as the last character in the Old Testament, and the quote from *Isaiah 40* about *departure and homecoming* may be heard in contemporary preaching. The decisive themes are still *emancipatory departure and glad homecoming*; it will require, however, a large act of imagination by the preacher to make a connection, for clearly the news is not now heard in the church as departure from Babylon and return to Jerusalem or departure from Roman severity and homecoming to Jewish well-being.

Here is how an act of contemporary interpretive imagination might work. What if, for exile and displacement, we take the alienation and displacement of the contemporary world that turns out to be a) a mad pursuit of money, success, and security that counts on exaggerated individualism and hostility toward the neighbor, and b) a bewilderment by new technological capacity that leaves the world a strange place or an invitation to hustle harder for more technological leverage. There are a variety of ways in which that alienating environment may be characterized, among them the way of Enlightenment rationality with its passion for control, the intoxicating consumerism that can never be sated, the National Security State that depends on fear and anxiety that commits its citizenry to an endless state of war and therefore an endless fate of amorphous anxiety. However a preacher may characterize it in a local setting (and the preacher has a lot of imaginative alternative ways of lining it out), it is clear that many people who lack labels for it know down deep that our current shared life is in a culture that is, by its very nature, alienating and that causes us to be dissatisfied strangers and restless threats to each other. The truth of that cultural setting is that all of us—liberals and conservatives—are situated in anxiety and endless pursuit of well-being that is always kept out of reach. The situation is not different from

that of our ancestors with the endless brick quotas of Egypt or the *endless requirements* of “Songs of Zion” in Babylon or the *endless threats* of Rome.

Imagine that the preacher of the gospel has the chance to change the subject, to announce that the fate of Enlightenment reason, frantic consumerism, and the National Security State are not the truth of our lives. The news is that there is a possible departure from the “empire of force” because the empire of force is not our true home and it could be otherwise.⁵ The preacher, in the context of the liturgy, constructs the highway of homecoming that permits us to depart that world that has exerted too much coercive power and that has left us all orphans. The rat-race is not where we belong. And we have known since Malachi that reconciling help is on the way. Advent is to start that journey toward our true home given us in the gospel.

Here is the concrete discipline of disengagement and departure offered by John Witte, simply a refusal to play the game and to accept that characterization of our life:

Both modern technology and modern privacy make escape to the frontier considerably easier than in the days of covered wagons and mule trains. Just turn off Pat Robertson or Jerry Falwell. Turn away the missionary at your door. Close your eyes to the city crucifix that offends. Cover your ears to the public prayer that you can’t abide. Forgo the military chaplain’s pastoral counseling. Skip the legislative chaplain’s prayers. Walk by the town hall’s menorah and star. Don’t read the Decalogue on the classroom wall. Don’t join the religious student group. Don’t vote for the collared candidate. Don’t browse the Evangelicals’ newspapers. Avoid the services of the Catholic counselors. Shun the readings of the Scientologists. Turn down the trinkets of the colporteurs. Turn back the ministries of the hate-mongers. All these escapes to the virtual frontier, the law does and will protect—with force if necessary. Such voluntary self-protections from religion will ultimately provide far greater religious freedom for all than pressing yet another tired constitutional case.⁶

But the preacher has more to say than simply the naming of the lethal system in which we are all variously enmeshed. John’s message, after the hints of Malachi, is not only a critique. It is also an anticipation. John’s work, even as starchy as his critique is, is to announce the one who is to come. That is the function of his quote from Isaiah 40. The highway leads somewhere! In the book of Isaiah, the imagined highway *leads to Jerusalem*. In the transposition of John, of course, it *leads to Jesus*. It leads to the baby who will confound Herod in Jerusalem. (Remember that on the First Sunday of Christmas we get Matthew 2:13-23 again, the slaughter of the innocents.) It leads to the crucified and risen Lord who will astonish the authorities in Rome and bewilder the governor. And between the baby and the crucified one, the road leads to the teacher rabbi who will astonish by his brave teaching, who will overwhelm by his inexplicable miracles, who will summon by his authority to a new life. The path of Advent will lead to Jesus. John belongs to the Old Testament; Jesus of course belongs to the New Testament, the new covenant, and the new regime. This is the one through whom “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.” (Matt 11:5)

Advent is to invite people to imagine homecoming. What would it be like to cross

over into the new regime, to come under the aegis of a new set of commandments and a new set of permissions. All that is required is to desist loyalty to the old order and take up the new disciplines that entail healing and transforming and caring. The discipline of Advent is to be ready to entrust life to the coming one.

Such a preached summons will of course evoke explanatory resistance. Every preacher knows about that resistance. And you and I, dear reader, also know the resistance ourselves...we have lives to live, we have budgets to raise, we have mortgages to pay, we have obligations to fulfill. Of course! The summons of *Advent departure* and *Christmas homecoming* is not likely to happen by heroic action, though here and there it might. It is more likely to entail steady intentionality that takes a step and a step and a step. I heard a TV preacher on the Exodus; his testimony was that the waters did not part all at once in the Red Sea. When Moses put his foot into the water, it opened a few feet in front of him. Another step and a few more feet of openness, but no opening without a foot in the water. The highway from the empire toward home is like that. It is not an "open road." It appears only enough to take the next step toward home; the road home keeps opening and appearing as we walk the walk.

All that is required in Advent is the recognition that the Old Kingdom of fear, anxiety, and coercion is not our true home. The good news of Advent is that there is another home and there is a path there, the path of intentional Torah obedience that has the neighbor in purview. On Christmas Eve the church makes its defining move from John to Jesus, from old regime to new home. But that moment of break from there to here is not in a vacuum. To get to that wondrous hidden hour of newness, we must be on our way.

The goal of Advent is to come home to Jerusalem, to Jesus, to the neighborhood, to peaceableness where the rule of the God of covenant is under way. At the threshold of home, where the subject has been changed and the road has been walked, the people of the gospel may all echo the well known mantra of the Shaker tradition:

'Tis a gift to be simple, 'tis a gift to be free,

'Tis a gift to come down where we ought to be.

That will preach! 'Tis a gift to be simple after all the *complexities* of the old enslavements that never satisfy. 'Tis a gift to be free after all the old *coercions* that leave us programmed into restless, breathless performance. And it is a gift: "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!"

In Advent the question is raised: Where ought we to be? Where is our true home? Well, our true home is with Jesus. Our true home is with Jesus' people. Well, our true home is with the lame who now walk, with the lepers who are now healed, with the deaf who now hear, with the dead who now have been raised, with the poor who now have heard good news. That whole company has departed the empire of force and disability in order to spend its time in glad amazement. Think about it! Nobody in Egypt or Babylon or Rome is ever amazed—fatigued, but not amazed. John, with his starchy word, is not the goal of the highway home. But he is the access point. The verse in Isaiah 40:1, just before the verses quoted by John, affirms that Jerusalem has suffered enough. It is an evangelical word spoken "tenderly" to all the displaced: Enough already! Advent could be among us a sense of self-awareness of the ways in which that old regime has sapped us of our humanness, of our true selves...and now we may be welcomed home! But we have to be on our way!

Notes

1 The verb “stir up” is a preferred usage to characterize the undefined way in which God impinges upon the public human process (see Isa 41:2, 25; 45:13; Jer 51:11; Hag 1:14). It is instructive that in the Anglican tradition, two of the four collects for Advent use the verb in an imperative.

2 Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

3 See Jon L. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia’s Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

4 This text is the Gospel reading for the Second Sunday in Advent.

5 I take the phrase “empire of force” from Simone Weil; on her usage, see the brilliant exposition of James Boyd White, *Living Speech: Resisting the Empire of Force* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

6 John Witte, Jr., *God’s Joust, God’s Justice: Law and Religion in the Western Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 262.