

Preaching the Advent Texts

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For those preachers who appreciate the rhythms of the liturgical year and the Revised Common Lectionary, there is no season quite as vexing as Advent. While everyone else around us is humming cheery carols and chirping “Merry Christmas!” we preachers find ourselves standing in pulpits sneering, “You brood of vipers!” Just when the rest of America (or at least, the America that is most visible to us) is gearing up for the holiday season that stretches from Thanksgiving to New Year’s, the church insists on proclaiming the end of the world as we know it.

Although the texts of Advent can sound an awful lot like bad news, they are, in fact, some of the best news possible. For what Scripture proclaims is the coming realm of God; the end of the world as we know it is actually a very good thing. In Advent, we hear that wrongs will be righted and the hungry will be filled. Yes, it is a season of waiting and of preparation. Yes, we do wait for the birth of Christ in our midst yet again. But even more, we wait for the coming kingdom. And we do not simply wait passively, but actively, as we *participate* in announcing and enacting Christ’s bringing in of the completed, redeemed creation. Advent’s texts show us how this happens – how Christ comes not simply to triumph over the world, but to restore it to wholeness, and how we can be part of it all, both now and on that great day.

It is helpful to think of Advent’s texts as part of a trajectory rather than a series of discrete Sundays. Some have described this as a journey from darkness to light, as the prophets’ calls to repentance and humanity’s desperate need give way to the dawning of the light of Christ at Christmas and the illumination of the world on Epiphany. This year’s texts from Luke’s gospel might also be seen as taking the church on a journey from a wondering watchfulness to a longing desire for the coming of Jesus. At the beginning of the season, the readings point to what is ahead – the overturning, indeed the redemption, of the whole world. By the fourth Sunday of Advent, we are eagerly awaiting the coming of Christ, crying out “Come, Lord Jesus!” for we are ready for him to come and make all things new.

First Sunday of Advent: Promise

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10; I Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

The first Sunday of Advent is full of words of promise. Through Jeremiah, God hearkens to the fulfillment of the divine promise to bring “justice and righteousness to the land.” This is an earthy, material happening. God will not simply change hearts and minds; God will transform the world and all that is in it. When it happens, God’s people will be safe, caught up in the new realm, for they are already claimed and named as God’s own.

The architects of the lectionary wisely chose Psalm 25 as a response to the reading from Jeremiah. Justice is coming, and the psalmist, whose words become our own, sings “keep me.” In the midst of the overturning of the world as we know it – that is the coming of God’s justice and righteousness – we pray for God to keep us faithful. We ask God to remember not our sinfulness, but God’s own merciful character.

The epistle is something of an echo of the psalmist's prayer, but here Paul prays not for himself, but for the Christians in Thessalonica. After hearing a good report about them from Timothy, Paul gives thanks for them and expresses the hope that he will see them again. Not only does he pray that their love might be increased in the present, but that God might strengthen them in goodness so that they might be "blameless" when Christ comes again.

All of these texts point to the gospel reading, which presents a vision of the new world that is to come. It is not a gentle picture. In fact, the whole earth and all of heaven will be shaken, and the happenings will confound people. They will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud," a reference to the prophet Daniel's own vision of what the day of judgment will look like (Dan. 7:13-14). (It is worth noting that one of the pericopes suggested for the previous Sunday, Reign of Christ/Christ the King, is Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14. The attentive preacher may make the connection here between the end of the liturgical calendar and the beginning. On the previous Sunday, the church proclaims the triumph of Jesus over all that kills or harms and his gracious reign over all the earth. On this first Sunday of Advent, the church begins, once again, to await that future.) Indeed, Luke's language sounds very much like Daniel's own apocalyptic language. One might respond with fear to his words, but this is not the gospel writer's goal. Luke's Jesus tells the people to "stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." This is not a threat, but an invitation. It is as though he tells the people – like Jeremiah's God – "I have already claimed you and named you as mine. So watch and be ready. You will want to be able to stand up and greet me when I come again."

Here, then, on the first Sunday of Advent, we see that the season is not simply a preparation for Christmas, but for the whole Christ event. Having told the whole story through the previous year, we begin it again. Have we told this same story for centuries? Yes. Have we been waiting all this time for Christ to return and make things right? Yes. Is the world still in need of a redeemer? God knows it is, yes. And so we start to tell the story again, beginning at the end, so we may renew the vision that keeps hope alive.

Second Sunday of Advent: Preparation

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

On the first Sunday of Advent, we were exhorted to stand up and be ready to greet the coming of our redemption. On this second Sunday, we hear that God enables us to do this – and, in fact, that our salvation has, in the most profound sense, already taken place. The first words we hear are from Malachi, who prophesies the arrival of a messenger who will announce the coming of the Lord. It is good news, but it will not be easy news. Last week's texts exhort us to stand at Christ's coming, but Malachi asks, "Who can stand?" For the Lord "is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap." Many of us are unable to hear those words Malachi – "for he is like a refiner's fire" – without hearing Handel's music. That's not such a bad thing, for Handel is an astute interpreter of scripture. The voices work into a frenzied fugue, intimating that purifying the people is no easy task for God either. The voices lick up like flames, suggesting that the energy required for such a task is significant. Those of us in the church who wonder whether we really need such purifying might remember Flannery O'Connor's story "Revelation," in which Mrs. Turpin has a vision. All of the people of whom she

disapproves – low-lives, half-wits, and people of all colors who don't meet her standards – are making their way up a stairway to heaven. They are marching out of step, whooping and hollering and acting the fool, while the good church people like her follow behind. Her people are orderly, singing in tune, and they are bringing up the rear. And, as she watches, Mrs. Turpin sees “by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.”¹

Malachi's image of fuller's soap is no less compelling. Just as fullers scrubbed wool to clean and bleach it before making it into garments, so God purifies us before clothing us in the white robes of the redeemed (cf. Rev. 1:13-14). One might make a connection here with baptismal garments, for in our baptism, we are already made clean and claimed by God in Christ, a promise of the ultimate redemption that will one day come. Similarly, one might recall the white pall over the casket. As the Presbyterian funeral liturgy reminds us, our baptism is complete only in death, when we are fully received into the life of the risen Christ.

This sense of the “already/not yet” nature of redemption is also voiced in the day's second reading. Here, instead of a psalm, we find a canticle, the song of Zechariah. Zechariah has endured five months of silence – during his wife Elizabeth's pregnancy he has been mute. Now the child, John, has been born, and Zechariah's tongue has been loosed. His first words are words of praise, and he blesses God for redeeming the people. Then he prophesies the coming of a savior. “And you, child,” he says, speaking of his own son, “will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.” Salvation has already come (1:68), and yet we are preparing to receive the one who brings it.

Paul's letter to the Phillippians confirms this sense of continuity between past, present, and future. He tells his listeners that he is sure that the God “who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.” As in his letter to the Thessalonians, he exhorts them to increase in love so that they might be blameless at Christ's return. The good work has begun, and it will come to completion; the followers of Christ must prepare by producing a “harvest of righteousness (1:11).”

Luke begins to tell us how to prepare for Christ's coming by narrating the story of John. He begins with the facts: Tiberius was in his fifteenth year of being emperor, and Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea. Herod ruled Galilee, and his brother was in charge of a neighboring region. Lysanius ruled Abilene during the time when Annas and Caiaphas were high priests. And then there was John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. In an ancient version of Google Earth, Luke shows us a big-picture map of the whole empire, gradually zooming in until we spot John the Baptizer, sojourning in the wilderness. We will hear more from John next week, but for now Luke tells us that he is traveling all through Jordan, preaching repentance and quoting Isaiah along the way: “Prepare the way of the Lord!” How? we might ask. And John replies by quoting Isaiah, “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 (Luke 3:4-6; Isaiah 40:3-5).” And why? That “*all flesh* shall see the salvation of God.”

John has given us our instructions. But how exactly do we prepare the way of the Lord in the twenty-first century? How do we fill every valley and lower every hill and straighten every path so that Christ will have a smooth way to all of us? We do it by preparing – that is rehearsing – the coming reign of God. We do not just “prepare our hearts and minds,” but we work at removing the impediments to justice and righteousness. What are the obstacles that stand in Christ's way? We fill the valley of injustice

with good things. We bring down the lofty places of the oppressors and the privileged. We begin the work now that Christ will complete, working to make equality and peace and honor for all part of the landscape so that Christ can make his way to us. To all of us.

Can we bring in the kingdom alone? Of course not. This is why we long for a savior. We pray for the kingdom to come, yes, but we also lean into it, working to make a way for Christ to come and bring all creation to completion.

Third Sunday of Advent: Joy

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

Joy abounds on this third Sunday of Advent! The first words of scripture on this day come from the prophet Zephaniah, who invites us to sing out loud, for God has put away judgment against God's people and saved them from their enemies. Even God rejoices over the people as if it were a festival day, for God is making promises: "I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth." Imagine those you know who walk around each day burdened by shame – for things they have done or things they have not done, for who they are or for who they aren't, those who are abused or ignored or cast off. Now imagine them adored by the whole world. Does it not seem too good to be true? Yet this is the prophet's proclamation. In fact, all God's people will be restored, for God will gather them in and bring them home.

The second reading, from Isaiah, is another biblical song and is placed, like a psalm, in response to the reading from Zechariah. After hearing the unbelievably good news, the prophet exhorts us to sing praises, to shout aloud and sing for joy. Similarly, the pericope from Philippians reads like song: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice," Paul writes, for the Lord is drawing near.

Then there is Luke. In the midst of all of this rejoicing, the voice of John the Baptizer rings out: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" Lest we think that our only job is to sing happy songs, John strides into our sanctuaries to remind us that true repentance bears fruit. A baptism of repentance is not only about personal salvation; we are to be responsible for one another, sharing what we have with those who need it. Even those outside the fold are drawn in by what God is doing: tax collectors are instructed to treat people fairly; soldiers are to live justly.²

Once he has our attention, John proclaims what is actually very good news. This is the way to live as we wait for the coming Messiah. And when that Messiah comes, he will burn away all that is not righteous, so that we might all be gathered in to the realm that he will usher in. As it turns out, then, we can still sing for joy, for God not only saves us, but shapes us into new beings better than we could be alone, caught up in the renewing power of the God who makes us, and the world, whole again.

Fourth Sunday of Advent: Birth of the New Creation

Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:46-55 or Psalm 80:1-7 (46-55); Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)

The fourth Sunday of Advent is pregnant with promise. Even the prophet Micah looks forward to the time of labor, when Israel's true ruler is born and all God's people will be gathered in. The Revised Common Lectionary offers two songs from which to choose: Mary's *Magnificat* and Psalm 80. The psalm picks up on Micah's theme

of the ruler as shepherd, calling to him to “come and save us!” The gestation period has been long; it is as if, after these weeks of waiting for salvation, we cry out, “We are ready!”

Mary’s song (Luke 1:46-55) is that of a woman anticipating birth, and she sings of the reign that is to come through her child. There is perhaps no more eloquent description of the great reversal that God will bring about when Christ comes again. Those who have abused power will find themselves stripped of it; those who have withheld food from the hungry will find their own bellies less full. It is a song about the world as God intends it to be – as it will be – where every one of God’s children is fed, where suffering is over, where no one has too little and no one has too much. Mary is not singing about some spiritualized gospel; she is talking about real economic concerns. Even more, she sings of a world where there are no more haves and have nots, where there is neither greed nor envy – where equality and justice are not about punishment and restitution, but rather about what brings blessing for us all. This is the reign of God that will be inaugurated with the birth of the child she carries. And neither is this child a spiritualized version of God. The author of Hebrews reminds us that God took on a body in the person of Christ – a walking, talking, eating, drinking, bleeding body in which he bore the sin and hurt and death of the world.

If the *Magnificat* is not sung or read as the second reading of the day, it may be included as part of the gospel reading. Here Luke tells us of Mary’s visit to Elizabeth. This story of two pregnant women, one impossibly old and one still a girl, is told in a stunning stained glass window crafted by the late Brother Eric of the Taizé community. The window depicts the two women greeting one another, each with a child in her womb. Elizabeth holds out her arms in welcome to receive Mary, and we see the figure of John (the Baptizer) kneeling within her, in greeting to the Christ child. Mary’s arms reach out to take hold of Elizabeth, and within her body we see Jesus, his arms also outstretched, as if to embrace John. (See <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/diglib-viewimage.pl> to view a photograph of the window on the Revised Common Lectionary site of Vanderbilt University.) If ever we were to doubt that the gospel is an embodied reality, this beautiful work of art reminds us that indeed, God came to us in the form of a fragile, flesh-and-blood child.

Poised at the end of Advent, we can look back and see the journey we have taken. We began, on the first Sunday, with prophecies of the whole world being shaken to its core, promises of cosmic breadth. Here on this fourth Sunday, we realize that our vision has been brought into focus, and we gaze now at one small child. The universal has become particular; God’s miraculous promises are brought to bear in the frail frame of a baby, who is about to enter the world just like the rest of us did, God made flesh.

Advent and the recovery of eschatology

There is, to be sure, great challenge in preaching during Advent, given all the forces that swirl around contemporary Americans during this time. And yet, our Advent preaching may be some of the most vitally important preaching we ever do. Advent preaching is eschatological preaching. We keep alive the vision of the world that is to come, the world as God intended it to be – not to make us placid until it comes time for us to die, but to invigorate our hope and to shape the Christian life. Hearing Mary’s song, for example, not only assures us of our future with God, but it molds and

directs our way of living here and now. God calls us not only to wait and hope for God's future; we are called to live into that future, participating in God's work of bringing in the kingdom.

We hear all sorts of movements and methods for renewing the church these days, and each of them brings something to the table. Yet at the heart of our quest for renewal must lie a reclaiming of eschatology. For this vision of what God intends for the world – of what God will, one day, bring to completion – is what fuels us for the living of the Christian life. If we count solely on our ethical impulses, or a sense of duty or obedience, we will eventually lose momentum and maybe even lose hope. But if we understand our efforts to work for peace and justice as part of God's completion of the world, then we are fueled by a divine vision that reaches far beyond our own good intentions.

The texts we hear during the season of Advent are central to this eschatological hope. There may be pressure to gloss over the hard parts of the Bible in favor of the sweet baby Jesus during this season when folks outside the church, and inside the church as well, are craving a sentimental holiday. There will be time for lullabies and angels' songs. But first, we preachers have the awesome responsibility and privilege of proclaiming the best news that can be heard: the radical coming of the reign of God.

Notes

1 Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 508.

2 Andrew F. Gregory, "The Gospel According to Luke" in *New Proclamation Commentary on the Gospels*, Andrew Gregory, ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 117.