

Preaching the Advent Texts: Hope, Peace, Courage

John Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, Illinois

Every year ministers are asked, “Why can’t we sing Christmas Carols in December? Why all those dreary hymns in a minor key?” Advent, it is frequently observed, is the church at its most counter-cultural. Outside it’s bright and cheerful, crowds of shoppers, Silver Bells on city sidewalks, an American holiday in full swing. Inside it’s dark at the very darkest time of year, the color is subdued purple, the same as Lent, and those hymns, droning on about “mourning in lonely exile.” The church I serve sits in the middle of one of the glitziest and most profitable retail shopping districts in the world. Our retail neighbors count on the time between Thanksgiving and December 25 for something like 90% of the year’s profits. They take this very seriously and begin earlier each year. By Labor Day, a few store window displays include holiday items. By Halloween more reds and greens, golds and silvers – and by mid November the Christmas holiday has arrived. So it’s no wonder some people want to sing “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” and “Joy to the World” on the first Sunday of December. After four decades, I have softened a bit on this issue. The Advent hymns are some of the best in the book, and I have come to love them and regularly explain why it is important to sing them in hope and anticipation. But I confess that by the second or third Sunday in Advent, we sing one carol at least, chosen carefully so the words aren’t tramping all over the fact that Christmas isn’t here yet.

It is a pregnant time for the preacher, made more provocative by the contrast between what is happening outside and the patient waiting inside the church. It is an opportunity to invite the congregation to begin to think about the earth-shattering and history-dividing event Advent anticipates and to connect big, rich biblical themes with contemporary realities. This year particularly, the Lectionary serves up some of the most theologically important ideas and lyrically beautiful poetry in the visions of Isaiah of Jerusalem. The first three passages suggest three strong and relevantly contemporary themes for preaching: Hope, Peace and Courage.

Hope: Isaiah 2: 1-5

Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* may not be the best book he wrote, but I find it retains over the years its capacity for entertainment and thoughtful reflection on the meaning of Christmas. I take it down from the shelf to get myself in a good place to begin preparing Advent sermons, and every time I am delighted by Dickens’ description of Ebenezer Scrooge as a “squeezing, wrenching, grasping, clutching, covetous old sinner.” On Christmas Eve, Scrooge is at his desk working when his nephew and employee Bob Cratchit wishes him a “Merry Christmas, Uncle! God save you.” The innocent greeting prompts a tirade about Christmas, prefaced by the memorable phrase, “Bah! Humbug! . . . What’s Christmastime to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for funding yourself a year older but not an hour richer, a time for balancing your books?”

Peter Gomes titled a wonderful Advent sermon “Hope or Humbug,” and in *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, Gomes confesses that Advent is his least favorite season because while the major theme of Advent is hope, a lot about the world in which we

live is devoid of hope. Every preacher knows how the superficiality and forced jollity of the holiday contrasts with and challenges the Advent theme that hope – hope for a better world, hope for a new world, a world put right, a world as God created it to be – is at the very heart of our Christian faith.

The late Joseph Sittler, who taught theology at the University of Chicago Divinity School, has always defined the authentic, reality based hope of Christmas for me.

I do not believe we are in a very good situation historically. I do not believe our relationship to the earth is liable to change for the better until it gets catastrophically worse. Our record indicates that we can walk with our eyes wide open straight into sheer destructiveness if there is a profit on the way.... But I do go around planting trees on campus.¹

Sittler wrote that decades before the longest war in American history, which seems even to its supporters a mismanaged and tragic mistake, and an oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico that has decimated some of the richest fishing and spawning waters in the world and that we know now was caused, at least in part, by a corporation willing to risk human welfare for quicker profits.

The prophet Isaiah lived in a similarly threatening and frightening geo-political situation. Neighboring states were teaming up to invade Judah. Everyone from the King on down was shivering in dread and fear. Hope is not shallow, but deep. Hope is not naively optimistic, but rooted in reality. Isaiah's vision is startling:

They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

In a geo-political situation every bit as frightening as our own, the prophet sees a vision of something that isn't here yet, an alternative vision of God's creation as God intended: healed, mended, reconciled, peaceful.

It isn't here yet, obviously. Furthermore we don't know when it is coming, according to Jesus. No one knows, not even the angels. God alone knows, in spite of the confident predictions of the apocalypticists. Faithfulness means remembering the vision, never letting it go, hoping for it, praying for it ("Thy Kingdom Come"), and working for it. Hopeful people wait and at the same time work for the coming of the Kingdom.

Halford Luccock used to write brief essays for *The Christian Century*. A collection of his Christmas columns was published years ago under the title *A Sprig of Holly*. My favorite, which I read annually, is "Living on Tiptoe": "Nothing really great ever happened without a great many lives being lived in expectation. Those are the kind of folk by which the world moves forward, always standing on tiptoe."²

To live hopefully is to work hard; to hope relentlessly is to throw yourself into the struggle for the realization of hope. To hope for justice and peace is to work for it. To hope for a time when all the children are fed is to do more than complain about the irony of hungry children in this land of abundance, it is to find some children to feed. Peace, we are regularly reminded, is hard work.

We know how the story of human history ends--with God's creation healed, whole, and all of God's people, at last, living together in justice and compassion and peace. Advent hope lives in the midst of darkness in every age. It will not be defeated, silenced, or extinguished. The light that is coming into the world shines in the darkness, after all, and the darkness has not and will not overcome it.

Peace: Isaiah 11: 1-9

Nineteenth-century American artist Edward Hicks loved the vision of peace in Isaiah 11 so much that he painted *The Peaceable Kingdom* more than 100 times. The animals are all there: wolf and lamb, leopard and kid, calf and lion. Hicks gave the animals wonderfully expressive faces that look almost human. The eyes are big, unnaturally big, wide open as if they have just been startled by something. In fact, that was the artist's intent. Peace is startling. You don't see it often, maybe ever. In the middle of the picture is a child, a little girl or boy, with her/his eyes also wide open as if startled by this unlikely reality.

The yearning for peace is timeless and universal. All people want peace for themselves and for their children. The longing for peace is deep within the human heart, and it is one of the great and enduring themes of the Bible. At Jesus' birth, angels sing about peace on earth. Old Simeon prays at the infant Jesus' dedication in the Temple, "Now lettest thy servant depart in peace." Jesus told his disciples to bless the homes that welcomed them with "Peace be to this house." The first thing the risen Christ says to his disciples is "Peace be with you." Contemporary worshippers greet one another by "Passing the Peace."

Isaiah's vision in Chapter 11 is one of the most eloquent and imaginative articulations of that yearning. Other than a brief period, one hundred years at most, Israel/Judah didn't have much peace. Isaiah is writing as he looks at a battlefield: the land has been laid waste, trees shattered, Israel's army has been defeated once again.

Isaiah sees a stump on the battlefield, a blunt symbol of defeat and death. It is the end of the monarchy which has been terminated, cut off, gone. But wait, the Prophet commands. "Look! Out of that dried-up stump, a green shoot is growing, a shoot of Jesse, King David's father." Incredibly, out of this vivid symbol of death, newness is emerging. The prophet sees a vision of a coming peace "where the wolf shall lie down with the lamb, a child shall lead them, and they will not hurt or destroy on my holy mountain."

Americans read the morning paper and hope that there hasn't been another suicide bomber, that a Palestinian rocket hasn't precipitated a deadly Israeli retaliation, that more beautiful young Americans have not died in Afghanistan. We live between yearning for peace and the reality of the world in the year of our Lord 2010. And the preacher's responsibility is to help the congregation remember the promise of Isaiah's vision and to point to signs, tiny green shoots sprouting in unlikely places – shoots of Jesse.

In every community, people of good will, Muslims, Jews, Christians are reaching across the enormous chasm of tragic history to find common ground. Jews and Christians, Jews and Muslims, Muslims and Christians are talking to one another more intentionally than at any time recently. In every community people of good will are working for the cessation of violence in the streets by attacking the root causes. In

every church, synagogue, and mosque, people of good will discuss systemic injustice and combine forces to oppose it . . . small, almost invisible green shoots.

Will Campbell is a wise, witty, and salty Southern Baptist preacher and social activist. In *Soul Among Lions* he observes that

most serious wars today are by people of competing religions. That's absurd. Let's do it this way: Judaism is the oldest of the three major faiths, Christianity is the adolescent in the middle, and Islam is the youngest. The youngest is generally the favored in the family. So let's all go to their house, all kneel on a rug and put our heads to the ground and pray, vowing as we do never to kill one another again in the name of God.³

Courage: Isaiah 35: 1-10

One of the ancient Christmas Carols in Benjamin Britten's "A Ceremony of Carols" concludes with a delightful image:

This little babe, so few days old
is come to rifle Satan's fold.
All hell doth at his presence quake,
though he himself for cold doth shake.

Or, as the prophet Isaiah put it:

Strengthen the weak hands
and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
'Be strong, do not fear!'
Here is your God.

A two word distillation of the Bible could be "Fear not." From cover to cover Scriptures implore "Do not be afraid." When the night sky shimmered and an angel appeared, the shepherds were terrified. "Fear not. Do not be afraid," the angel said. "Sore afraid" the King James Version puts it, and I used to think the shepherds were so afraid they made themselves sore from shivering. Jesus constantly encouraged his followers not to live their fears. When he decides to go to Jerusalem, they are afraid and beg him not to go. When he is arrested, they all flee in fear. After his crucifixion they cower in fear in a locked room. And when a few of them venture to the place of burial early Sunday morning and find the tomb empty, the words come again: "Fear not. Do not be afraid."

The Biblical assertion is that when God comes, there will be nothing to fear. Centuries before the birth of Jesus, Isaiah wrote to a nation frightened for good reason. Judah is small, weak, and vulnerable in the face of the threatening armies of surrounding neighbors. The future looks grim. There are a lot of shaking hands and feeble knees when the prophet exhorts, "Strengthen weak hands and make firm feeble knees."

The Bible has so much to say about fear because fear is such an enemy of life. It's hard to love when you are afraid. It's hard to care passionately about anything

when you're afraid. It's impossible to be joyful about anything when you are afraid. Fear limits life, constrains life, pollutes life. Fear can be a good thing when it alerts us to danger. But Peter Steinke writes that when fear becomes overwhelming, alertness diminishes, and adrenaline floods the body, riveting the body on the object of the fear. Tunnel vision occurs and fear takes over.⁴

That's exactly what happened to us after 9/11. Fear took over, and its effects are still evident, and tragically, we began to behave in ways that contradict and deny our highest and best values. Striking out in fear, we invaded a nation that had nothing to do with the terrorist attacks and found ways to justify torturing prisoners.

Robert Frost said that what really frightened him were frightened people. How then shall we live in this dangerous world? Not naively, ignoring clear risk and danger. Maybe Isaiah's formula is the most relevant: "Say to those of a fearful heart 'Be strong. Do not fear! Here is your God.'"

God's coming, the prophet proclaims, changes things fundamentally. There is nothing ultimately to fear. The coming of God in Jesus Christ means that final issues have been resolved. The coming of the Christ into human history, to live our life, to die our death, to defeat the power of death in his resurrection means that there is nothing to fear. The final battle has been won.

Good friends told me once that when they put their young daughter to bed, said bedtime prayers, kissed her good night, for years she would say, "Make sounds." She wanted the security of her parents' presence, the comforting sounds of their voices, dishes being dried, the television set, sounds of home and safety and love. In Jesus Christ, God comes close, in the sound of a human voice. Beyond the beauty of the story of Christmas, Christians believe something cosmic has happened. Everything is different now. Evil and suffering and death have been put in their place. There are, and will be, times when every one of us will be frightened and have weak hands and feeble knees. And across the centuries come the words: "Be strong. Do not fear. Here is your God." And we will sing with hearts full of joy:

"Yet in the dark streets shineth
the everlasting light:
the hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight."

Notes

1 Joseph Sittler, *Grace Notes and Other Fragments*, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1981), 97.

2 Halford Luccock, *A Sprig of Holly*, (New York, NY: The Pilgrim Press, 1978), 46-48.

3 Will Campbell, *Soul Among Lions: Musings of a Bootleg Preacher*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 49.

4 See Peter Steinke, "Fear Factor," *The Christian Century*, (February 20, 2007), 20.