

Preaching the Advent Texts

"New heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home"

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Advent is a season of intentional waiting -- not a passive waiting or a waiting in agitated boredom or frenetic activity, but an expectant, hopeful, yearning kind of waiting for the future that God is creating in the world and in us. We are waiting for a baby, and so there is that sense of joy and awe and life-altering newness. But all of it is magnified beyond anything we can even get our heads and hearts around because this baby carries joy and awe and newness not only for a family and a community, but for the world. This baby, we might say as we begin our year with Mark, is in himself the beginning of the good news that changes everything, the news that the utterly new, totally unsettling, magnificently beautiful kingdom of God is at hand.

If we are willing to dwell with the Advent texts and not move straight to Christmas, this gets unpacked for us in tremendous, unexpected ways, with earth-shaking justice and righteousness, deep comfort, and heartrending promise. The Advent texts suggest that, if anything, when it comes to Christmas, we may not be thinking big enough.

I will confess that I have always been one of those people who are happy for a full month of the baby Jesus. I keep my tiny manger scene of French santons up all year. I want four to five weeks of carols and would take more if it were offered. But as I have grown better acquainted with the lectionary in recent years, I have also grown to appreciate the lectionary version of Advent -- not just in a respectful, intellectual way, but in a deep-down, heartfelt way that meets me in the hopes and fears of all my years.

The Advent texts give us space in which to remember why we need a savior. They press us to name the things from which we and the earth are awaiting redemption, the reasons why God needs to be born to us anew. They force us to look further and deeper into God and into ourselves, beyond the pretty and the sparkly of Christmas to the beautiful and the shining -- the beauty that is so awesome and simple that it takes our breath away and the light that is so bright that it disarms and disorients and penetrates and transforms us.

Many of us have come to associate the Sundays in Advent with the lighting of the candles on the Advent wreath and the themes of hope, peace, joy, and love. These themes are then often placed in conversation with aspects of the birth narratives of Luke and Matthew. But it is also possible to allow these Advent gifts for which we wait and which characterize our waiting to be unpacked by the Advent lectionary passages.

The Advent texts offer us ways to explore anew the grounds for our hope and the things toward which it presses us; the substance and source of our peace; the backdrop to our joy and the things over against which we choose it and in spite of which God causes it to grow in us; and the object and character of our love and, more important, of God's love.

I have chosen as a title and theme for the season a verse that mentions none of those four gifts, but which seems to encompass all of them. In the second Sunday, we

read in 2 Peter 3:13 that “we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.” Newness and righteousness hover over all of Advent, like Gerard Manley Hopkins’ vision of the Holy Spirit brooding over creation with “ah! bright wings.” We see this in the socio-political new things being wrought by God in the Messiah, in new life for the world, in new hearts and minds for us -- all attended by righteousness bending over the earth as peace reaches up and kisses it in the holy dance of Psalm 85.

So we wait for that newness -- not passively, but joining in the Psalmist’s dance of righteousness and peace, faithfulness, and steadfast love. For our own sake and for the sake of the world God loves, we do the deep, searching, disorienting, reorienting waiting of Advent for God’s transforming newness to consume the world’s dross and leave it shining, refined, golden.

First Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down . . .”: Hope

Advent begins with a lament. “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down . . .,” cries the prophet Isaiah. “Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel . . .,” sings the Psalmist. The church year begins there, with a call to God by the prophet and the Psalmist to come down and change everything.

We spend three weeks of Advent with Isaiah, but before we get the comfort of Isaiah 40 in week two and the gladness of Isaiah 61 in week three, we have this cry of Isaiah 64 to a God “who works for those who wait for him,” who will come like fire and make the nations tremble as he has come before and made the mountains quake at his presence. God’s people need him because they are filthy and faded and insubstantial, blown like the wind by their iniquities. But they have a history with God: “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are the potter . . .”¹ Their hope rests on this history, their memories of God’s faithfulness. Still, in verses not included in the lectionary, the passage ends with a series of questions: “Will you keep silent . . . ?”²

There is a kind of call and response in the Advent lectionary texts. With the Isaiah passage, we join the prophet in calling for God to come, to tear through the heavens. Then with the Mark passage, Jesus responds. God, who has already torn through the heavens in Mark 1:10 and whose kingdom is at hand in Jesus, will make his presence known again in the coming Son of Man. Together the first week’s texts remind us that we are not only remembering a waiting that happened before. The lament of the prophet and the Psalmist is our own.

The quaking of the mountains and the trembling of the nations in Isaiah is echoed and expanded in Mark 13:24-37 with the shaking of the powers in the heavens, the stars falling, the dissolution of the cosmos. In both cases this is a message of hope. In Mark, Jesus compares it to the fig tree announcing summer and to the master of the house returning from a journey -- fruitfulness and homecoming. And we are to be present to welcome him home. Then Jesus’ last words here in 13:37, before his passion is set in motion, are these: “Keep awake.”

In his book *Awareness*, Anthony de Mello offers some insights into what it might mean for us to do as Jesus says.³ He suggests that this spiritual awakening, or awareness, is a living in the eternity of God right now, not weighed down by things that do

not matter, but free to live fully and well.

The epistle reading, 1 Corinthians 1:3-9, adds that God has equipped us for our waiting with every spiritual gift. Because we know where this letter is taking us, we remember that we are not given these gifts in isolation. Spiritual gifts thrive in community, and so we are together in Christ, sustained by Christ, living as Christ's body in enduring love. We do not cry or wait alone.

These images of hope certainly raise us out of the everyday concerns that can sometimes overwhelm us. They lift our eyes to the larger hopes and blessings of scripture, the fulfillment of which will shake the earth and the heavens, God coming down in power and renewing the world, God, our Father and our potter, reshaping us for good. This is a hope based on experience of what we know God to have been and done in our lives and what we know God to have been and done in the shared narratives of our sacred texts. But it is in the nature of hope that we both know and do not know this, which is why we cry out and which is why we need to be told again and again to wake up to God's coming, to be reminded that the kingdom of God is already at hand.

Christina Rossetti touches on the enormity and mystery of this week's texts in her poem "In the Bleak Midwinter." The poem begins in a cold, hard wintry place. Then it bursts into the second coming, just as our Advent texts do on this first week: "Our God, heaven cannot hold Him, nor earth sustain; heaven and earth shall flee away when he comes to reign . . ." Rossetti moves from the splendor of heaven to the intimacy of the stable and back again. With melancholy beauty she captures the essence of this first week's texts, which hold in tension the mystery of God and our great need for him to come and make himself known so that we can give him our hearts.

That is where the Christmas season begins -- with our hopeful waiting and his response: I have come, and I am coming again.

Second Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

"Comfort, O comfort my people . . .": Peace

After the cry of the first week in Advent, our texts begin this week with a decree of comfort. The quaking and the fire and the dissolution of the cosmos of week one, which figure again in 2 Peter 3:8-15a, make way here for new heavens and a new earth. The way is being prepared for the master of the house to come home, and the herald voices the good news, which is echoed by Mark and the baptizer crying out in the wilderness.

In the traditional dating of what has become known as Second Isaiah, the comfort and new beginning of Isaiah 40:1-11 follow on the warnings of Isaiah 39 only after a hopeless silence of more than 150 years, during which Zion has been left desolate by conquering Babylon.⁴ But now the exiled, dislocated people are being restored. In verse 9, the prophet, as the embodiment of Judah, is twice addressed as the herald of good tidings or *gospel*, and the substance of the good news is summarized: "Behold your God!"⁵ God is authorizing "a superhighway across the desert between Babylon and Jerusalem."⁶ God, the mighty warrior of verse 10 and gentle shepherd of verse 11 will be revealed in glory as he leads his people home.⁷

Psalm 85 takes up the themes of Isaiah 40: restoration (v. 1), forgiveness (v. 2),

glory (v. 9). Where the God of Isaiah 40 speaks comfort, in Psalm 85:8, God the Lord speaks peace. Then in the Advent dance of verses 10-12, steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss; faithfulness springs up from the ground as righteousness looks down from the sky. Goodness surrounds the Psalmist and us. God's alternative Christmas decorates the cosmos. Then in verse 13, the way is prepared again, not by a prophet or a herald, but by righteousness itself.

The epistle reading gives us a picture of what it will look like when he arrives. Borrowing from Isaiah 65:17, 2 Peter 3:13 points again to the promised coming, marked by a complete undoing of all creation, but he moves beyond it to the new heavens and new earth that will come with God in God's time, which is beyond time (3:8). Newness, where righteousness will be at home, cannot come without a displacement of the old, where righteousness was out of place.⁸ Things have to be leveled to make way for the glory.

But God's new thing will surely come in God's good time, and Mark, foregoing the introductory remarks of John's prologue or the birth narratives of the other Synoptics, sums up with one verb-less verse the coming toward which Advent moves us: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

Then the new beginning for the exiles in Isaiah 40, replayed in Psalm 85, is echoed in the new beginning of Mark 1:1-8 with gospel and forgiveness and the superhighway being prepared for the homecoming of all of the ones who have been crying out for God – all the broken and the marginalized, the quietly despairing and the privately bound.

The herald of good news is now the wilderness man John. As in Isaiah 40:1-2, the good news means a new start. John is preaching a baptism of repentance (another way of waking up, as Jesus commands in Mark 13:37) for the forgiveness of sins. And everyone is coming out to him as he points to the more powerful one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

It is not uniformly pretty. John the Baptist, eating locusts, wearing camel's hair, won't let it be just pretty. It is edgy and mysterious and big. There is a turning involved away from the old us, a letting go of things as we know them and waking up to things as God sees them. The peace we are offered in our Advent texts is not an easy peace. Even the beautiful, lyrical magnificence of Isaiah 40 comes only after weeping and praying and a long wait. And the new heavens and new earth of 2 Peter come only after the old has passed away.

Real peace, holy peace, does not come cheap. But without it we too are exiled, unforgiven, homeless people. So we join the Babylonian exiles and the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem, and we watch for the warrior-shepherd to come in glory to comfort us and lead us home.

Third Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126 or *Luke 1:46b-55*; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

"To bring good news": Joy

Every year we have two Sundays of Advent with John the Baptist. In this second Sunday of our year with Mark, where John the Baptist is already in prison by 1:14 and does not reappear until his execution in 6:17-29, we dip into the Gospel of John. We leap across the eternal Word to meet the witness John, and then we skip over the

advent of the true light, to hear the testimony of the one preparing the way.

A trial motif runs throughout the Fourth Gospel, and it begins here in the prologue and then in this first episode of the Gospel with the testimony of the man sent from God to bear witness to the light. Jesus will also testify. Then his friends are called to testify (15:27); and so we too, as Jesus' friends, are called to be bearers of good news, pointing to the light and advocating for the alternative way of life that is God's way.

The Isaiah passage for the week tells us more about the content of our good news; the verbal form of the word *gospel* features here in verse 1. The poet-prophet has been anointed to *bring good news*. We read what this means: binding up the broken-hearted, proclaiming liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, proclaiming the jubilee year when society is made new, comforting all who mourn. "For I the Lord love justice . . .," God interjects in verse 8.

The prophet lists the glorious reversals that await the desolate exiles, issuing from "the great evangelical 'instead' of Yahweh": a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. The righteousness that runs through the Advent texts emerges again; they, the formerly mournful, oppressed, captive, brokenhearted ones, will be oaks of *righteousness*, displays of God's glory, who build up and raise up and repair; these who were helpless are now part of God's holy newness.

The poet rejoices exceedingly in this gospel. The poet, clothed in righteousness by God and witnessing the blossoming of God's garden of righteousness and praise, exults joyously with his whole being.

That is an Advent state of mind. That is how we prepare for the coming of God's righteousness. With the first weeks of Advent texts, we lament, we are comforted, and now we rejoice. The theme is echoed in the harvest of joy of the Psalm, laughter accompanied by shouts of joy (v. 2), rejoicing (v. 3), shouts of joy (v. 5), shouts of joy (v. 6). Like those who dream are we, because God is doing great things, great newness, great righteousness. Joy also marks the alternative song for the week, the Magnificat, in which Mary's spirit rejoices in the promises of God, a string of reversals reminiscent of Isaiah 61. "Rejoice always," writes Paul to the Thessalonians (5:16), joining in the theme with prayer and thanksgiving reminiscent of the joy-filled letter to the Philippians.

We have good news. We are the witnesses to the light. It sounds wondrous because it is. We remember that Jesus also proclaims the newness of God in just this way, borrowing from Isaiah 61 in what functions as his programmatic address in Luke 4:18-19. It reminds us of who precisely the one greater than John is, who that baby in the manger grows up to be.

We also know that when he preaches this sermon, his neighbors try to throw him over a cliff. The conflict is already underway in our Gospel text this week as well. The first witness has been called. His good news is dangerous to the authorities who are trying to hold everything together, who need things to stay as they are, and Jesus, who in this Gospel most of all is not just the bringer of good news, but the embodiment of it, will be far more threatening than John.

God's joy for the world means that someone who was on top loses control of the ones underneath, and that is destabilizing for everyone. And so we can see why it might seem more comforting to preach and imagine a content-less gospel, an insub-

stantial, fairy-lit joy. Only we all know that it isn't. We know that even among the economically favored, we have broken hearts, we have dislocation, we need newness, even the kind that undoes and remakes society and us. Even if it scares us to death, we need God's justice-loving joy. So it is worth the risk. Worth dying for even.

People will take offense at the adult Jesus. The good news will lead the witness and the Word to their deaths. Then, in the life-giving mystery of God, the stone will roll away, and the crucified one will blow the breath of the Spirit over our broken hearts, our injustices, our fears. And we, even we, will be oaks of righteousness -- alternative Christmas trees, rustling with joy in the holy wind of God.

Fourth Sunday in Advent

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:46b-55 or Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38

"For nothing will be impossible with God": Steadfast Love

Finally we come to the baby, announced by Gabriel and heralded by the prophet-mother Mary. The particular combination of texts for this fourth week in Advent underscores that this can only be God's story, God's initiative, God doing the impossible work of newness in the world and in us. Newness, Christmas, love, all are God's doing in the first place. It is not that there is nothing we *must* do to make Christmas happen; it is that there is nothing we *can* do. Only God can make that impossible child. Only God can create real newness. Only God can do forever. And this week God will.

It is a week of two Messiahs, two promises. The first Messiah, David, wants both to honor and to enclose God elaborately in cedar, an offer God counters with something less confining and more permanent. God does not need a house-temple, but God will give David a house-dynasty, and it will be forever. The word appears twice in verse 16. It has to be this way because any settledness David might feel, any sense of achievement, is God's doing anyway, and any hope for an enduring future must rest on God too.

This gracious initiative of God links this Messiah and this promise to the Gospel reading. God's steadfast love, which is by definition unconditional and eternal, and the power of God to do impossibly new things bring us to Mary and the Messiah announced to her and again the promise of unending faithfulness on God's part, unasked for, unimagined, unmerited. The kingdom of this impossible child will have no end; again it is repeated – *no end* and *forever* (1:33). The promises of God to Israel being fulfilled in Jesus, of which Mary sings, are again *forever* (1:55). And in the optional song of the week, the Psalmist will sing *forever* (v. 1) of God's steadfast love, established *forever* (v. 2) in the covenant with David.

In Luke's birth narrative, unlike Matthew's, there is no emphasis on scandal, no indication of dismay at the news. The Mary we meet here is joyous and bold. Mary's song, read alongside the annunciation, opens up both texts for us by making clear what kind of kingdom Gabriel is promising and by revealing what sort of person God has chosen to carry the king. The first three weeks of Advent have prepared the way for Mary's song so completely that it should almost go without saying, but sometimes the message of the brave young glorifier gets lost all the same, or at least that is not the Mary we seem to hear about most often when the annunciation story is told. This young woman speaks, with the images and hopes of a prophet, of a world

turned upside down by God's insistence that the hungry should be filled with good things, the lowly lifted up, the dangerous message of newness that makes life hard for prophets, as it will some day be soul-rendingly hard for Mary (2:35). But for her, at this moment, as far as we can discern here, there is only joy.

Although we do not read the paragraph preceding the annunciation or the one that connects it to Mary's eruption of prophetic joy, we are aware that there is another woman and another pregnancy in view. She is present in the little subordinate clause that begins the annunciation: it is Elizabeth's "sixth month" of her miraculous pregnancy. Then it is to her that Mary's song is addressed. One could even say that she elicits it with her joyous response to Mary's greeting and the joyous response of John who leaps *in utero*. Mary, in the literary context of the text, is not alone. Her good news is shared not only with the angel but, at the angel's suggestion, with another woman surprised by the impossible possibilities of God.

As Mary and Elizabeth know, it is always bigger than the miraculous pregnancies, for them and for us, because the one who was called barren and the one who was a virgin are drawn into God's time, God's plan not just for themselves, but for the world. These impossible pregnancies point to God's impossible work in the past and future of Israel, which is always ultimately a story of all the nations coming to God's new heaven and new earth.

God's intentions are overtly socio-political here, as Gabriel and then Mary make clear. There is talk of thrones and kingdoms and a reordering of things in the newness of God, a fulfillment of the story of God's steadfast love for David. Already in the story with the children still in their mother's wombs, power is being redefined, expectations overturned, social structures subverted, God revealed again as bigger than any human system or expectation.

It is certainly a disorientation and reorientation of a Christmas that is about shopping and parties. And for many of us that could be a great relief, to know that all of those trappings are irrelevant, incongruous even when they are placed alongside God's magnificence coming near to and embracing our fragile humanness. That is where the comfort and joy of Christmas week lies in this alternative reality of God that the Advent texts teach, in pointing to and experiencing in ourselves the mysterious greatness of God doing great impossible things in our smallness, as we celebrate how he did the greatest thing of all, the very incarnation of divine steadfast love, in the womb of a brave young poet from Nazareth.

It is good news for all of us that we have the sort of God Mary and the prophets describe and that he calls us to live in and proclaim the alternative reality of his love. It is strange, mysterious, beautiful good news that God comes in the form not of an invincible action hero but of a human baby boy born to a human woman and that he asks us to live not as invincible people marked by success in all we do — or marked by a mighty struggle to succeed on the world's terms and hang on to youth and beauty and money and things that do not make for peace — but as vulnerable people marked by God's love, God's impossible newness, God's justice and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. God's ways may not be what we always want or expect, but they are always ultimately, mysteriously, impossibly better than what we want or expect.

Perhaps it is worth saying, even though we all know it to be true, that for many people, what lies behind the good cheer of Christmas is a broken heart. But Advent

has room for all of the feelings that this season might bring, all of the circumstances in which human beings may find themselves. The Advent texts suggest that, far from being a time for unmitigated mirth, the Christmas season, which begins with a lament, has plenty of room in it for our brokenness and the brokenness of the world. God's steadfast love, joy, peace, and hope meet us and the world in all our complicated humanness, not only at the manger, but before it and beyond it. God has room in his house for all that we bring at Christmas. We are invited to come as we are, with only our hearts, as Christina Rossetti puts it – even if they are broken.

It is worth dwelling in the place of waiting with our hopes or our hopelessness, our certainty or our anxieties, because when we do that, God may blow our expectations and hopes wide open. The Advent texts remind us that God is more than we hope for, and God is beyond our expectations, and God is just different from what we think we're getting. His ways are not our ways. And so he can turn us upside down in just the way we need so that we can see with new eyes the little child and the world he came to save.

Notes

1. In *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 238, Walter Brueggemann compares this to our address of God as Father in the Lord's Prayer: "It is confidence in this God that evokes the great 'yet' of faith as the ground for all coming possibilities."
2. In *Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 81, Brueggemann writes: "If we are to understand prophetic criticism, we must see that its characteristic idiom is anguish and not anger."
3. Anthony De Mello, *Awareness* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).
4. Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 15-16.
5. Brueggemann (*Isaiah*, 20) identifies this as the "first intentional, self-conscious use of the term *gospel* in the Old Testament."
6. *Isaiah*, 18.
7. In *Prophetic Imagination* (71), Brueggemann says of this description of God: "It includes the comfort of enormous power, with stress on *fort* (strengthen); it includes the comfort of nurture, with stress on *com* (along with). Israel is in a new situation where singing is possible again."
8. As Brueggemann puts it in *Prophetic Imagination* (30), it is the "over-againstness" of God that allows for the possibility of newness.
9. *Isaiah*, 218.