

Preaching the Advent Texts

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This year we find ourselves in one of those Advent seasons that does not begin Thanksgiving weekend. Instead, the Sunday after Thanksgiving is Reign of Christ/Christ the King Sunday. This timing gives us ample opportunity to stretch out into the season rather than trying to pull off the First Sunday of Advent with a skeleton crew of folks. The changeover of paraments, the Advent wreath, the beaming church members lighting the candle of hope—all of this will happen on December 2 rather than in the post-turkey hangover of late November.

Many people I know lament the loss of Thanksgiving as a holiday in its own right; instead it has become the opening act for the December headliner. What might it mean to luxuriate in the practice of giving thanks? How might a Sunday service focused on gratitude frame the season of Advent and provide a corrective to the acquisitiveness that can creep in despite our best intentions to observe a simple and frugal Christmas?

The more traditional liturgical route, of course, is to highlight Christ the King/Reign of Christ that Sunday. Thanksgiving's panoply of comfort foods is a fond memory or still languishing as leftovers in the fridge. Black Friday has come and gone, and it's either been an occasion for good-natured early morning fellowship with family and friends or for shaking one's head at the thrown elbows and the trampled shoppers. Or it's been both.

It would be interesting to explore what the kingdom of God means even in the afterglow of these experiences. What kind of kingdom has Christ inaugurated? In what way is that kingdom come; in what way does it remain unfulfilled? For what do we hunger, even as we gorge ourselves on food and good deals? My friend Joe Clifford likes to say to the congregation he serves on Reign of Christ Sunday, "Grace and peace in the name of Jesus Christ, the leader of the free world." What does it mean for us to be citizens of Christ's "free world," and in what ways are we still captive?

The extra week gives us time to ask these questions. But there is a distinct liturgical disadvantage to the lateness of the Advent season. Those of us who hold off on singing Christmas carols in worship already have our work cut out for us; we are out of phase with the shopping malls and pop radio stations. Many of us let the lesser known carols in the canon slip through by the Fourth Sunday in Advent, but this year, people will be clamoring for the goods by Advent 2 or 3, and we will be holding off the Christmas carols with a whip and a chair.

It is probably worthwhile to name this tension. As followers of Jesus, we are misfits in time; we would do well to acknowledge it. While the cultural countdown ticks toward the arrival of Baby Jesus (or maybe just Santa Claus), we have our sights set on the Second Coming. As people chuckle once again over the Mayan's supposed prophecy that the world will end soon, we Christians must shrug our shoulders and admit that we, too, have some wacky ideas about the final fulfillment of human history.

Advent is about preparation for that fulfillment, as well as readiness for the Christ

child to be born in our hearts once again. And yet Christmas does not wait until December 24. It insists on arriving during the getting ready, whether in the form of Christmas cards in our mailboxes or the youth group caroling event. But that's reality, isn't it? Our lives are not so neatly partitioned into preparation and fulfillment, training and doing. During the pastoral internship, the seminary student ends up becoming someone's pastor, ready or not. Or we arrive in our first calls ready for action, yet also realizing how much we still need to learn. We let our kids go (to kindergarten, to college) before they seem "ready." The readiness is in the doing. Life is one big mess of on-the-job training. So perhaps it is OK to sing "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus" and "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear" in the same service of worship.

First Sunday of Advent – Jeremiah 33:14-16, Psalm 25:1-10, 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13, Luke 21:25-36

Some pastors like to lead off on Advent 1 with a hearty "Happy New Year!" Such a greeting serves as a reminder that the liturgical cycle begins anew a good month before the secular calendar rolls over and people vow to quit smoking and return to the gym. We bid adieu to the Gospel of Mark and say hello to Luke's rock-'em-sock-'em message of liberation and economic justice.

Even if you don't wish the congregation a happy new year, there is a whiff of newness in the first Sunday of Advent: a new heaven and new earth, that is. The focus of the lectionary texts is relentlessly future-oriented. Jeremiah promises a devastated people that "justice and righteousness" will prevail, even in the wake of a ransacked Jerusalem. The psalmist implores God to be a teacher, instructor, and guide on the right path: God is a God who is taking us somewhere. This path toward wholeness is Paul's preoccupation too, as he prays that "our Lord Jesus Christ direct our way to you" (1 Thess. 3:11). And Luke, of course, paints a vivid picture of God's eschatological work coming to fruition. We will see it on the cosmic level (sun, moon, and stars) and in a personal way. (There will be fear and trembling over the things to come.)

At least two threads tie these texts together, and each might provide a direction for preaching. One thread is the emphasis on God's salvific *word*. The restoration that Jeremiah foretells has a name: "the Lord is our righteousness." And Jesus, too, promises in Luke that "heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." These verses call to mind the classic prayer for illumination: "Amid all the changing words of our generation, speak your eternal word that does not change." The Word has become flesh and dwells among us. The Word will become flesh again.

Preachers might spend some time exploring the power of divine utterance in a world of cheap talk. By the first Sunday of Advent, the so-called War on Christmas will be going full tilt, as pundits wring their hands over the rise of "Happy Holidays" over "Merry Christmas." Such rhetoric is as inevitable as it is pointless. There is a brash cynicism in referring to a store's policy for greeting customers as an act of "war," particularly when there are actual non-metaphorical wars being waged all over the globe, some in places we haven't even heard of.

Set aside the overheated rhetoric of cable news pundits, and there are still plenty of words filling our December, ripe for critical engagement. The rum-pum-pum-pums of the Little Drummer Boy rap on our skulls; invitations to rock around the Christmas tree come fast and furious over PA systems in shopping malls across the country. And of course, there is the unrelenting language of marketing, the constant urging

to communicate sentiment through the purchase of stuff. “Tell her you love her with a diamond.” “Say ‘Seasons Greetings’ with a gift card from The Home Depot.” Yes, our stuff does speak volumes about us, like it or not. But these messages will pass away. All things will pass away, except for the word of God.

In addition to the *words*, we have the *signs*. Both Jeremiah and Luke lift up the image of green growing things as a harbinger of God’s reign come to earth: Jeremiah, like Isaiah, lifts up the “righteous branch” that will spring up. And Luke’s Jesus invites his listeners to consider the fig tree, whose leaves will be a sign of summer fulfillment.

My friend and colleague Ellen Crawford True tells the story of a tornado that powered through her town, requiring one of the church’s large majestic trees to be cut down. The congregation decided to turn over the tree’s trunk to a sculpture artist who would carve a nativity scene from the wood. This is the good news of Advent: even the thing that is cut down can be transformed into a bearer of new life, through Christ for whom we wait and in whom we trust.

Another spin on God’s leafy hope comes from the Pixar movie masterpiece *Wall-E*. The story takes place in a distant (or not-so-distant) future in which we have consumed so much stuff that the planet is no longer able to sustain us. The environment spoiled, the creation ruined, we head to outer space on huge pleasure cruisers. Wall-E is a robot whose mission is to crush the trash left on earth. He smashes all of our discarded junk into small cubes that he stacks into towering skyscrapers that reach up into the smoggy brown atmosphere.

One day another robot shows up named Eve. Wall-E isn’t sure what she’s up to, but they strike up a friendship. Wall-E takes Eve back to his bunker, where he has collected various odds and ends that he has found to be of interest—a toy, a string of Christmas lights, a spork. And when he shows Eve an old boot with something inside it, everything changes. Inside the boot is a small sprout. It’s just a tiny shoot, really, with one puny leaf on it, but it’s alive, and it’s growing.

We find out that Eve is a probe, sent to Earth to look for signs of life. Her mission is to collect specimens and take them back to the ship. The thought is that if just one plant can grow, then maybe Earth can sustain life again. Then the people can come back and start rebuilding their world. The branch springing up from a discarded boot is a paltry sign compared with mountains of discarded stuff. But it is sign enough. Eve’s task is our task on the first Sunday of Advent. In a world piled with things, we are called to sleuth around for signs of life—*real* life, green life, steeped in spiritual chlorophyll and giving off oxygen, the *ruach* without which we perish. We could find worse guides for the task than Jeremiah, Luke, Paul, and the psalmist.

Second Sunday of Advent – Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 1:68-79, Philippians 1:3-11, Luke 3:1-6

“I don’t want to hear another sermon where we make snide comments about John’s clothing or diet,” my friend and colleague Anna Pinckney Straight has written. “John had a job to do and a word to share, and we should let him share it with us, too. And we should do it without managing or minimizing or contextualizing his message.”¹

Unlike Mark, the pericope from Luke does not get into John’s dietary or sartorial choices, but such details cling to our memories nonetheless. And Anna is right. Sermons about John the Baptist can reduce the prophet to a carnival sideshow. He is

so... unfestive. So Grinchy. But the message of repentance is vital, and it jostles us, right in the line at the Apple Store.

Luke goes to pains to locate John in a particular time and place: the time of Tiberius, in the region of Pilate, Herod, and so forth. We can almost see Google Earth panning down, down, down through these geographical layers to the shores of the Jordan River. But the picture backs out again, because John does not stay on the riverbank. He goes into "all the region" with his message. The particular becomes universal as he speaks even to us, two thousand years later.

The Second Sunday's call to repentance gives us a glimpse into the Lentishness of Advent, but such a move needs some unpacking. Several years ago I attended a study trip with seminary classmates at the World Council of Churches. We spent a few days in Munich before reporting to Geneva for the course. The museum there had a display of Christmas related artifacts, and we were fascinated by a bearded goat-like creature that appeared to be preying on small children. Without a working knowledge of German to read the accompanying placards, we could only assume that the goatman was Santa's evil twin.

We weren't too far off. Krampus is a figure from Germanic folklore who follows Saint Nicholas around in December. Whereas Nicholas provides treats to good children, Krampus is on the lookout for naughty children so he can punish them. In the case of especially wicked children, the story goes that Krampus stuffs them into a knapsack and takes them back to his lair to have them for Christmas dinner.

Sadly, modern Christians too often see John's call to repentance in a similarly grotesque light. We try to fit John's camel-hair costume with goat horns, Krampus-style. But repentance during Advent is not about adopting a self-flagellating posture. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan write in their book about Advent that repentance means to "go beyond the mind that you have."² Advent repentance asks us to consider the ways we have become captive to outmoded ways of thinking. How does the incarnation of God in Christ confront the status quo? How does God's trajectory toward redemption make a difference in the here and now?

These questions are not simply mental exercises. They impact the ways we live in the meantime: who we love and how; what we buy; how we spend our time. Craig Barnes has described the rule of St. Benedict in a way that illustrates this everyday decision making. Benedict wrote that when the community welcomes a new novice, they take the person's street clothes and dress the newcomer in the novice's robe. But they hang the person's street clothes in an unlocked closet, so that each morning the person has to make a decision anew: *What identity will I put on? Who will I be? Whom will I serve?*³

This kind of repentance is life-giving and joyful. (Maybe all repentance is ultimately this way, even the Lenten kind.) Paul's letter to the Philippians is soaked in thanks and praise even as it acknowledges God's work as still in progress: "The one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion" (1:6). And in Luke, Zechariah sings praises for his long-desired son, who will "give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins" (1:77). It is worth noting that Zechariah and Elizabeth were members of the upper class, elites of their time. The message of John (and later Jesus) is not solely for the down-and-out, though surely it is that. It is also a message of light for anyone who sits "in darkness and in the shadow of death" (1:79). It is for those who hum in the checkout aisle of Trader

Joe's and those who can't stomach the holly-jolliness. It is for those who have crossed everything off the list and those who are trying to make it through another Christmas season without steady work. It is for the parents contorting their faces to get their kids to smile on Santa's lap and for people grimacing in pain at yet another failed fertility treatment.

Third Sunday of Advent – Zephaniah 3:14-20, Isaiah 12:2-6, Philippians 4:4-7, Luke 3:7-18

Every year in mid-December, I find an afternoon when I can be alone in the house. I go through my children's toys and books, sorting them into piles: donate, give to friends, recycle, and throw away. The sorting is essential, otherwise we will be overrun with stuff on Christmas morning. Fellow parents laugh in recognition as I describe this "toy rapture," in which items mysteriously disappear from our family room, usually without the kids even noticing.

Someday, I pray, my children will have the maturity and temperament to help me with this task. I imagine them boxing up a carton of treasures, reminiscing and chattering about the unknown children who will receive these items. But they do not have that temperament. In talking to other parents, I know my kids are not unusual. Every plastic Happy Meal toy is priceless; every board book, long forgotten, was once beloved and is thus suffused with meaning. Some of these precious items stay, but many must go to make space for new items that will come to them at Christmas. So I do this culling work on their behalf, and I remember that Meister Eckhart said that the spiritual life is a process of subtraction even when one is in elementary school.

There's a lot of good news on the Third Sunday of Advent. Zephaniah promises a bounty of goodness for "daughter Jerusalem" (3:14). God will provide a homecoming, victory, gladness, and love. Paul chimes in from the pages of Philippians, urging the people to "rejoice in the Lord always" (4:4). But it's helpful to wonder with our congregations what must be released to make space for a joy that is so plump and full? Paul's word for "rejoice" in Greek also means "farewell." What do we need to say goodbye to in order to say hello to the love of God incarnate in Christ?

Meanwhile, John the Baptizer continues to hammer us with the message of repentance. Taken together, these passages urge us to practice what poet Macrina Wiederkehr has called the "sacrament of letting go." Over the years I've noticed that it's this week, the third week of Advent, when people start throwing Christmas traditions overboard. *I'm not getting a tree*, a person who lives alone might say. Another puts her foot down: *I'm not setting foot in another mall. If I can't get it online, I don't need to buy it*. In the age of Facebook, I've jettisoned Christmas cards several years in a row and never looked back. Somehow, through some miracle, there's still a baby in the manger come Christmas Eve.

More and more people are embracing simplicity in Advent—letting go of a few of the "shoulds" to allow for more time for quiet, for family and friends, and for God. It's a practical decision; there's only so much time, so something has to give. But perhaps this letting go, too, is a form of repentance. John seems to think so. His listeners ask him again and again, "What should we do?" His answers—share one's coat, collect only the taxes that are lawful, be satisfied—speak of modesty and simplicity. His instructions are an embodiment of Eckhart's notion of "subtraction." And he ends with a reminder that, as important as these instructions might be, the most

important action will be God's initiative. Christ will baptize, winnow, clear, gather, and yes, burn the chaff of all that must be let go.

Today's texts and their emphasis on subtraction give us permission to start talking about the baby. This is how the God of the universe comes, in a stunning display of frailty and downward mobility. As pastor and writer Debbie Blue puts it, "God doesn't come to the world looking big and self-sufficient and simple and coherent, like an answer or a moral absolute, but looking weak and hungry, totally dependent on his mother. That's what babies are like. They can't propel themselves. They can't even focus their eyes. Helpless is not a bad word for what a baby is. God comes into the world as a baby. That is a subversion of how we might expect the almighty to come."⁴

Fourth Sunday of Advent – Micah 5:2-5a, Luke 1:46b-55, Psalm 80:1-7, Hebrews 10:5-10, Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)

The subversion continues on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, when Micah makes the striking announcement that the ruler of Israel will come from one of the "little clans of Judah" (5:2). The redeemer will "feed his flock in the strength of the Lord" (5:4). As if in response, the psalm picks up on the shepherd imagery and bellows out a plaintive *We're ready; bring it on*: "Stir up your might, and come to save us!" (80:2).

We began our Advent journey with a look at the power of utterance, and as striking as Micah and the psalm may be, it is Luke whose words truly soar—or perhaps we should say *sing*. The Fourth Sunday of Advent gives us Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth, Elizabeth's words of blessing, and Mary's song proclaiming the topsy-turvy kingdom of God.

After Mary's visit from the angel, she sets out "with haste" for Elizabeth's house. Something compels her to go quickly, eagerly. Perhaps it's to share this moment with Elizabeth, to shower her with congratulations, to marvel at the holy bizarreness of it all. Perhaps in the precariousness of Mary's own situation, she figured it would do her good to focus on someone else for a while. Whatever the motivation, Mary arrives, and the words of greeting are barely out of her mouth before Elizabeth is shouting with utter delight, saying, "Blessed are you among women! Blessed is the child that you carry. Blessed are you, who believed."

I wrote about this passage in this journal many years ago. I said then, and believe now, that Elizabeth's blessings are more than declarations. They are not simply descriptive. Elizabeth's blessings *call Mary into being* as a mother and the *theotokos*. After all, Elizabeth's words are a gift of the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit which, it has already been told, empower Mary to conceive and carry this child in the first place. The words matter. The blessing matters. How can we believe otherwise and worship a God who spoke the world into being?

And Mary responds to the blessing with a song, which is an improvisation of the song Hannah sang after the birth of her son Samuel. But it is not a sweet lullaby. It is a battle cry, bold and defiant. Mary sings for the weak and the lowly, the poor and the hungry. Every hurting son is now her son; every hungry daughter is now her daughter. Before, they were simply among her; now, they dwell within her. And the song erupts from that place deep down where she carries them, where she bears them in her own body.

My friend and colleague Michael Kirby tells me that several years ago, someone began stealing the baby Jesus figures from outdoor manger scenes in his Chicago neighborhood. It turned out to be a prank, and the figurines were later found in a woman's yard, 32 of them, sorted by size and type. Unfortunately, many people coming to claim their figures tried to walk away with a "nicer" Jesus than the one they'd had. "They were trading up," he said. "Everybody wanted the freshly painted, unfaded baby." Mary would not approve of such cheap attempts at an upgrade. "[God] has lifted up the lowly," she sings. God has looked with favor upon the dingy, the faded, the forlorn, and discarded figures of this world.

"All generations will call me blessed," Mary sings. "My soul magnifies the Lord." Other translations say, "My soul *glorifies, exalts, praises* the Lord," but this is the *Magnificat*, after all. Mary's life magnifies God. Like a magnifying glass, Mary magnifies—makes larger—the mighty acts of God. Through her, we see who God is. Her life and her faithfulness bring God's gracious intentions for the world into focus—into sharper detail.

This, finally, is our call in Advent. It's all well and good to glorify God, to exalt God, to sing God's praises, and many of our churches excel in these tasks, especially during this season. But Mary urges us not to stop with praise. How are our lives magnifying God? When people look through us, through the lens of our lives and our Advent ministrations... what do they see?

Notes

1 From a paper written for The Well lectionary group, February 2012.

2 Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007); Kindle Edition, Location 3322.

3 Craig Barnes, from an address to the Festival of Homiletics, 2010.

4 Debbie Blue, *From Stone to Living Word: Letting the Bible Live Again* (Kindle Location 1080).