

Advent Preaching when Everybody Is Talking about Religion—Especially Politicians

Guy Sayles

First Baptist Church, Asheville, North Carolina

When Advent begins this year, preachers and parishioners in the United States will have known the results of the national election for less than a month. They will either be wondering what changes in his approach to governing Barack Obama might make as his second term begins or pondering the likely shape and tone of a Mitt Romney presidency. They will also be evaluating the significance of whatever changes in the makeup and functioning of Congress the election might bring. Is it possible that there will be an outbreak of bipartisanship, pushing legislators, as distant as they can ever be from the next election, to work together on the nation's pressing problems rather than to perpetuate gridlock? Or will change result because one political party will have control of both the White House and Capitol Hill? Or will the dreary status-quo remain, with government mired in business-as-usual?

It is likely that people will feel a measure of relief that the constant campaigning, much of it negative, will have ended; but I doubt that they will feel much confidence about the condition and direction of the nation. That lack of confidence will have to do, in part, with the adverse economic climate which will be the weather of Advent worship. No one realistically expects that the harsh winds of high unemployment and frustrating underemployment will have abated much by then or that the storm clouds of the foreclosure and banking crises will have significantly dissipated or that the threatening thunder of debt-ravaged European economies will have suddenly stopped rumbling. As it has for several years, economic uncertainty will spread an uncomfortable chill through the Sundays of Advent.

Political and economic stressors will have Advent worshippers in the United States on edge. As is always true, they will also bring with them anxieties and fears rooted in their immediate circumstances and growing from their personal concerns. Some will be tangled-up in loss and grief. Others will be in a thicket of thorny interpersonal conflicts at home or work or school. Still others will feel the weeds of addiction or apathy choking their vitality. Some will be withering in arid soil of adversity, while others will wonder if they are being washed away by a flash flood of crisis.

There will, of course, be some people who gather for Advent worship who are flourishing with well-being. Likely, there will be excited young parents who are nearly as wide-eyed with wonder as their children as they anticipate the magic of Christmas morning. Perhaps there will be a middle-aged man who recently got the news that his last X-rays and scans showed no lingering evidence of the cancer for which he has endured long and hard treatment. Maybe there will be single mom who will move in, with her two elementary school-aged children, to the Habitat for Humanity house she worked alongside volunteers to build. She will be home, in *her* home, for the holidays. It could be that there will be a soldier who has returned from a tour of duty overseas and feels her eyes fill with joyful tears as she sings these words from: "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel": "Bid envy, strife, and quarrels cease; fill all the world with heaven's peace."

What is the ancient and ever new message of Advent which, whether they can name their longing or not, people yearn to hear during these uncertain times? What is the Advent gospel for people who feel anxious, troubled, and trapped, as well as for people who feel confident, grateful, and free? What kind of language honors that message? What sort of words best express it? This Advent, *what* do we say and *how* do we say it?

The Message of Advent: The Nearness of the Kingdom and the Promise of a New Creation

Advent announces that, in the coming of God's kingdom, light will overcome darkness, hope will displace despair, and love will cast out fear. Under God's rule and reign, and in harmony with God's will and way, creation will be restored, the world will be transformed, and all things and all people will be reconciled to God and to one another. From the debris of the past and the chaos of the present, God will shape a radically and radiantly new creation: old things will pass away, and all things will become new (2 Corinthians 5:17).

This Advent announcement of restoration, transformation, and reconciliation is in sharp contrast to standard political and governmental rhetoric which, most often, deals with incremental improvement of existing conditions, but not thoroughgoing change; with addressing and ameliorating problems, but not solving them, and with controlling or containing conflicts, but not resolving them.

Political leaders might speak of "a shining city on a hill," yet the city they envision is not a bright colony of God's rule. At best, it is a city still ordered and disordered by the ways of the world, but patched, painted, and polished to appear new. They might call for a "new covenant," but any covenant which they help to fashion would have only the ties of a shared need for freedom and order among differing social classes, ethnic groups, political parties, religious communities, and of economic interdependence—tightly woven strands of supply and demand, investment and return, capital and profit. Such a covenant would hardly be "new" and would be more like a set of interlocking contracts than an authentic covenant. A genuinely "new" covenant, characterized by equality, mutuality, commitment to the common good, spacious shalom, and overflowing abundance cannot be built on the "old" assumptions of scarcity, fear of the other, and violence as a tool of so-called "peace."

Political rhetoric, even (especially?) when it uses the language of religion, serves to maintain the status-quo and to legitimate the powers-that-be. It encourages adjustment to, and management of, the way things are rather than inviting people to receive and cooperate with the in-breaking kingdom of God. The assigned gospel lesson for the first Sunday of Advent (Luke 21:25-36, Revised Common Lectionary, Year B) concerns the surprising incursion of that kingdom (21:31). God is determined to finish the liberating work God started in the history of Israel and intensified in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. As God did with Jesus, so God will do with the earth and with us; God will rescue it and us from the powers of diminishment and death. Advent begins, this apocalyptic text tells us, with the assurance that Easter will overtake the universe, and the hope of the resurrection will find fulfillment in every nook and cranny of the cosmos.

Before that bright day, however, Jesus said there will be trouble:

There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken (21:25-26).

This trenchant poetry essentially means that before God's work is done, evil and chaos will nearly shatter our spirits. We will fear that we are stuck in a moonless and starless midnight. Tsumnais of tragedy will rush toward us.

Nevertheless, Jesus said, we can trust that "the Son of Man will come in a cloud with great power and great glory." That phrase—"the Son of Man coming in a cloud"—was (is) Christian shorthand for the Coming Again of Jesus. Members of the early church often reassured one another that the future would shine with wonder, because "the Son of Man was coming." "When the Son of Man comes," this old world will be made new and our broken hearts will be healed. "When the Son of Man comes, 'distress among nations'" (21:25) will become peace; "fear and foreboding" (21:26) will give way to love and security. "When the Son of Man comes," the burdened shuffle of the troubled will become gleeful dance of God's carefree children. "When the Son of Man comes," the dull, drab, and despairing kingdoms of this world will become the luminous, glorious, and joyful kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Here is the glad truth which followers of Jesus have learned in the nearly 2,000 years since he spoke these words we find in Luke's Gospel: God isn't waiting until "the Son of Man comes" to do these surprising and saving things. Jesus doesn't just come twice: once in Bethlehem as a baby and once "on a cloud" to wrap things up. By the Holy Spirit, Jesus comes over and over again. The Advent promise isn't simply, or even mainly, about the end of time. It is about how, when the campaign-style slogans of optimism don't deliver a better tomorrow because they are part of the old world which is "passing away," the truth and energy of Jesus' words endure and call the new world into being (21:33). It is about how, when we have crashed into the limits of our knowledge, power, and courage, God's kingdom breaks into the here-and-now to startle and save us.

The Message of Advent: God's Word in the Wilderness and the Gift of Repentance

On both the second and third Sundays of Advent, we encounter John the Baptist (Luke 3:1-6 and Luke 3:7-18, Revised Common Lectionary, Year B). Luke contrasts John with the official leaders of both Rome and Israel:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

Given our contemporary distinctions between leaders of the "state" and of "religion," we often think of Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, and Philip as the former and of Annas and Caiaphas as the latter; but, in fact, such distinctions did not then exist. Rome legitimated its power by means of the cult of the Emperor which demanded supreme and worshipful loyalty to him. Annas and Caiaphas exercised

considerable executive authority in local matters and were first among equals in the Sanhedrin, a legislative as well as religious council. To use our terms, all of the leaders whom Luke listed held positions in which they wielded both “secular” and “sacred” authority. People expected to hear from the gods through the Roman officials or from the God of Abraham and Sarah through the high priests, but the word of God did not come to them in their imperial palaces or in the Jerusalem Temple. It came, instead, to John in the wilderness.

Luke’s contrast of John in the desert with the leaders in the seats of power serves as a crucial reminder that God is not bound to speak through the messengers whom we authorize by means of ordination or election. In fact, the concentration of human pride and power in the institutions of both religion and government means that the people who lead them can be particularly blind and deaf to the sights and sounds of God’s kingdom. They are often not free enough of self-interest to receive and speak “the word of God” without distorting and manipulating it for their own purposes. The halls of power, whether palace or temple, capitol or church, can be so filled with the noise of self-promotion and self-justification that God doesn’t get a hearing. That is why God’s word often goes to the wilderness, to people like John.

In his article in this issue of the *Journal for Preachers*, Will Willimon says, “Preaching is a primary means that God uses to dismantle religion, to take us into the wilderness.” I simply add that preaching is also a means that God uses to deconstruct the idolatrous claims of the state. In the wilderness, John declared that the God who dismantles religion and deconstructs the state was coming. John called people to prepare the way—and themselves—for God’s arrival by practicing the hard but healing discipline of repentance.

Advent preaching offers people the gift of repentance, the gracious opportunity to reframe how they think and feel about God, about life, and about themselves. In this season, we say that, in Jesus, a new reality is rushing toward us from the future. We are at risk for missing it, however, if we do not turn from habits of the mind and heart which push God out of our conscious awareness. If, in the course of daily life, we think of God at all, it is as distant and disinterested observers.

When we marginalize or minimize God, we are tempted to surrender to culture’s crushing fear of death, a fear which generates free-floating anxiety and, as a consequence, fuels addictions; intensifies insecurity and, therefore, increases conflict; and leaves people feeling powerless, and so, makes violence alluring and captivating. Without a palpably present God, we cannot deal with guilt and shame. Without an actively self-revealing God, we cannot find meaning and significance. Without a gracious and merciful God, we cannot discover the delight and freedom of knowing ourselves to be God’s beloved children.

To repent is to turn toward God, made most fully known to the world in Jesus, and to center our lives on the good news that God is *with* us and *for* us, gladly, lovingly, and always. That news is garbled almost everywhere except the wilderness; but there, we can hear it: neither religion nor politics can save us. Only God can. Advent promises that God has saved us, God is saving us, and God will save us. Again, as Will Willimon says in his article, “Our vaunted religion is so sad because Jesus Christ has already fixed the problem between us and God, bridged the gap, done the work.”

The Language of Advent: The “Poetry” of Attentiveness and Longing

Advent is a season of longing during which, as Gordon Lathrop puts it, “the Christian assembly tells the truth about a world still full of waiting and want.”¹ The lectionary texts from the Hebrew prophets and the Psalms remind us of Israel’s waiting for the Messiah, and they give expression to our own longing for the fulfillment of God’s new creation. As followers of Jesus, we join him in his prayerful desire that God’s kingdom fully come and God’s will be completely done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Advent puts us in feeling-touch with what Ronald Rollheiser describes as “an unquenchable fire, a restlessness, a longing, a disquiet, a hunger, a loneliness, a gnawing nostalgia, a wildness that cannot be tamed, a congenital all-embracing ache that lies at the center of human experience.”² That ache includes a yearning for hope, a hunger for meaning, a thirst for joy, a need for mystery, a craving for ecstasy, and, most of all, a desire to be known and loved.

At the same time, Advent invites us to attend to the wonders of God’s rule and reign already made visible and audible through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Such wonders are often hidden in plain sight and whisper beneath the clamor of noise which characterizes our plugged-in, online, and media-saturated culture. It isn’t that they aren’t present; rather, we are distracted from them. Advent calls us to “guard our hearts” and to “be alert at all times,” so that we do not miss the impending nearness of God’s kingdom (see Luke 21:29-36, Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, First Sunday of Advent). Poet W. H. Auden said that the “choice of attention—to pay attention to this and ignore that—is to the inner life what choice of action is to the outer. In both cases a man [*sic*] is responsible for his choice and must accept the consequences, whatever they may be.”³

Advent preaching hones our capacity for attentiveness and honors our truest longings. That means, in my view, that the language of preaching should reflect, even if only implicitly and indirectly, the preacher’s own longing, looking, and listening. I am troubled by preaching which trades in language which sounds like the preacher borrowed it from the keynote speech at a management seminar or patterned it after the latest self-help bestseller or paraphrased it from an op-ed in *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal*. It’s unimaginative, motivational, moralistic, and, often, superficial language; it is easily heard, generates nearly immediate emotional responses, sounds directly relevant, might be temporarily helpful, and is then quickly forgotten.

The poignant medieval hymn-text “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded” poses this profound question: “What language shall I borrow to thank Thee, dearest friend,/For this Thy dying sorrow, Thy pity without end?” Preachers are “language borrowers.” We search for words with which to render thanks and to offer praise for God’s own longing and eagerness to befriend us. What language *can* we borrow to describe the breathtaking love of God, a love so humble and tender, so welcoming and self-giving, that it causes us to call Jesus our “dearest friend”? The work of preaching involves a quest for turns of phrase, images, metaphors, and stories which narrow the gap (which can never be closed) between the glory of God made known in Jesus, the living Word of God, and our always limited and always inadequate words about that Word.

While limited and inadequate, the language of Advent preaching shouldn’t be abstract. In his essay, “Politics and the English Language,” George Orwell lamented

“staleness of imagery” and “lack of precision.” He offered this well-known, but worth repeating, example of how abstraction makes such staleness and imprecision inevitable:

I am going to translate a passage of good English into modern English of the worst sort. Here is a well-known verse from Ecclesiastes: “I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.”

Here it is in modern English: “Objective considerations of contemporary phenomena compel the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account.”⁴

Abstraction blurs and muffles attentiveness: “the sun” gives way to “phenomena”; “the race” and “the battle” become “competitive activities”; “time and chance” are blandly blended into “a considerable element of the unpredictable.”

Preaching can become mind-numbingly abstract, general, and universal. Attentiveness grows when the language of preaching is concrete, particular, and local. In Sharon Creech’s novel for children, *Hate that Cat*, Jack, a budding young poet, disagrees with his Uncle Bill, a university professor and experienced poet, about the work of William Carlos Williams. Jack reports:

Just as I expected
my uncle Bill
is not a big fan
of Mr. William Carlos Williams.

Uncle Bill says Mr. WCW
is a “minor poet”
and
a “foe poet”
(later my dad explained
he meant *faux*
which means “fake”)
and I said

“What about the
‘so much depends upon’
poem
and the plum poems?”

(which are stuck in my head
and I can say them from memory)

and Uncle Bill said
“Tuh! Overrated, highly
overrated!”

And I found myself
sticking up for
poor Mr. William Carlos Williams
and the small ordinary things
he writes about
and the small ordinary moments
that you don’t notice
until you read his poems
and Uncle Bill said

“Small things? Small moments?
Tuh! Give me LARGE things!
LARGE moments!
Give me poems about
death and dying
about war and tragedy
and philosophical metaphors
give me sonnets, give me odes. . . .”

blahblahblah⁵

Advent preaching can do for our hearers what the poetry of William Carlos Williams did for Jack; it can help them to notice the signs, sometimes thinly-veiled by “small ordinary things,” of God’s extraordinary new creation. When we linger over the stories of actual people who live in particular places, we learn to love them. Love sharpens our abilities to see and to hear in their lives the dramas of human need and longing, met by divine provision and fulfillment. Wendell Berry was right to say that “abstract love” is a “contradiction in terms”; there can really be no “abstract love,” because “love makes language exact.”⁶ When we use such language, we bear witness to the Advent gospel of God’s saving proximity and transforming power; we invite those who hear us to trust that God’s kingdom is *near*, wherever one is, and that God’s kingdom is *now*, whatever the time.

Notes

1. Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2003), 170.
2. Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 4-5.
3. W. H. Auden, *A Certain World: A Commonplace Book* (New York: Viking, 1970). Cited in Winnifred Gallagher, *Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life* (NY: Penguin Books, 2009), 10.
4. Orwell, George. “‘Politics and the English Language,’ 1946.” Mount Holyoke College. <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/orwell46.htm>.
5. Sharon Creech, *Hate that Cat* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 94-96.
6. Wendell Berry, *Standing by Words* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983), 60.