

Preaching the Lectionary for Advent: The Gospel Texts

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In two ways the lectionary complicates our sense of time. First it complicates the way we understand “real” time. (It is a sign of my total bondage to old ways of thinking that when the television commentator tells us that we are about to get a report in “real time,” I am entirely puzzled. And I am even more puzzled when I have recorded the program and realize that the “real time” they are talking about was six hours before.)

In our real time and the real time of our congregations, we are largely consumed with the pressures of everyday. This Advent everyday includes a still fragile economy with unemployment as a threat or a reality for many of our community. Everyday includes the daily bulletins from the Middle East where the confusions of December when you read this may be slightly different from the confusions of September when I write, but when we can guarantee that life will be confused and dangerous and that we as a nation will be playing at solving the insoluble. And our real time will certainly include the ongoing commercial push for us to spend our way toward one of the happiest Christmases ever. The push is commercial because the point of it all is to help commerce flourish, and the push is commercial because it is carried more often by commercials than by scripture, candles, or holy calendars.

The lectionary gives us a different sense of time. We discover that we are surrounded by God’s time. In God’s good time a child will be born to us and a son be given. We may want to resist the liturgical fundamentalism that insists that we can never sing Christmas carols until Christmas eve at midnight, an insight often puzzling to our people and entirely lost on the muzak programmers at Macy’s. But we do want to acknowledge that in the midst of our daily lives, we live in anticipation of God’s always surprising and always gracious incarnation. Always and especially at Advent, the creation waits on tiptoe for the revealing of the Son of God.

And what is even more confusing, we are reminded from the first Sunday of Advent on that what we wait for is not only the imminent consummation of the manger, but the transcendent consummation of all of human history in the majesty of the providence of God. Who knows what that will look like? Even Jesus grows reticent about the details. We note that time after time we are surprised by the way in which God interrupts time. Almost certainly we will be surprised by the way in which God consummates time.

Part of preaching the Advent texts is reminding our people and ourselves that this is a time of waiting and not only a time of consuming. Part of preaching the Advent texts is reminding our people and ourselves that we wait for the Christ who comes and who is to come.

There is a second way in which the Advent lessons from the Gospel of Matthew complicate our sense of time. The texts violate narrative time; they violate canonical time. Matthew wrote his story in a particular order—an order in part inherited from Mark but in part shaped by Matthew’s particular theological and pastoral concerns.

Matthew begins by placing the story of Jesus in the context of God's long dealing with Israel, and Matthew ends by using the story of Jesus to promise God's continued sovereignty over the world. Then Matthew talks about the birth of Jesus and only then about John the Baptist and only two thirds of the way through the Gospel about the consummation of time. So not surprisingly, Matthew presents the four pericopes for Advent in this order: Matthew 1:18-35, Matthew 3:1-12; Matthew 11:2-11, Matthew 24:36-44.

The Revised Common Lectionary gives us Matthew 24 followed by Matthew 3 followed by Matthew 11 followed by Matthew 1. Of course Matthew didn't know that his Gospel would be used for the Advent Season, nor did he know that there would be an Advent Season, but he did know how to tell a story. Martin Luther and John Calvin both typically preached from a *lectio continua*...Matthew all the way through, Sunday after Sunday, for instance. Surely they knew they were honoring canonical time, and they were honoring narrative time as well.

Because I am more committed to the canon than to the Lectionary, I would hope that as preachers we can give Matthew his due. Though we start the season with Matthew 24, we may want to start the sermon by reminding the congregation what has gone before in Matthew's Gospel, and though we end the season with Matthew 1, we may want to remind the congregation what is to follow in Matthew's gospel. Nonetheless, with all these caveats and complications, we have the season and the lectionary and the Gospel texts. Here are a few thoughts for each week.

First week in Advent

Matthew 24:36-44

Rudolf Bultmann got considerable blame and considerable appreciation for "de-mythologizing" the New Testament. What he mostly did was to de-apocalypticize the New Testament. I have yet to find a way to preach this text that does not pay some attention to the way it disconnects with much of our lives. Matthew lived with expectations that simply did not come true in the way that he and his congregation expected.

Nonetheless, we live and wait in hope. What we hope for is the completion of God's sovereign reign, and there is considerable comfort in the reminder that not even Jesus pretended to know (or maybe even to worry) about the details (Matt. 24:36). In the meantime there is a certain perverse pleasure in noting that according to Matthew 24, we want desperately to be Left Behind. Otherwise we will be swept away like the sinners of Noah's time. And there is considerable wisdom in noting that however we understand God's final action, we are always called to be ready, alert, and responsible.

Second week in Advent

Matthew 3:1-12

We know that Lent is a time to repent. We less often remember that Advent is as well. How can we really await the gift of God in Jesus Christ without changing the way we are? One thing we cannot do is rest on our credentials: our ancestry (children of Abraham), our education, our church membership. We can only repent and throw ourselves on God's mercy.

Each of the four Gospels brings John the Baptist on the scene before Jesus begins

his public ministry. Advent reminds us that even as we approach this happy season, we cannot get to Jesus without John the Baptist.

Third Week in Advent

Matthew 11:2-11

At Advent we celebrate and anticipate not only the messianic words, but the messianic works. In Jesus Christ God is at work healing, cleansing, restoring sight, and preaching good news to the poor. The statistics about poverty in our country are not good. The gap between the wealthy and the poor grows apace. Pundits grow popular by blaming the victims. Good news to the poor needs to include attention to the causes of poverty.

All of us who hope to be citizens of the kingdom of heaven serve the Messiah of justice and imitate John the Baptist and his passion for God's reign—only more so!

Fourth Week

Matthew 1:12-25

Mary is the protagonist of Luke's nativity story; Joseph is the protagonist of Matthew's. More than any other gospel, Matthew is concerned with what righteousness looks like, and right from the start, Joseph exemplifies that righteousness. He attends; he obeys. In Matthew 5-7 Jesus will present the great program of the Kingdom; we seek to attend and obey.

For Matthew more than any other Gospel writer, what happens in Jesus Christ is not so much God's new idea as the fulfillment of God's eternal purpose. Isaiah saw the baby coming. Joseph in Egypt dreamed dreams to anticipate the other later Joseph (soon to be in Egypt himself). Joseph is told to name the boy Jesus, and Matthew knows what the name means: "The Lord saves." Blessed Advent.