

Preaching Advent Hope

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Is Advent Passe?

The cynical proclaimer might infer that “Preaching Advent Hope” refers to our hope that our churches will tolerate a week or two of authentic Advent proclamation and hymnody before a congregational mutiny demands the more expected Christmas cheer, for such is the fate of many preachers during Advent. We preachers have a reason for insisting on Advent before Christmas, other than simply to play the role of disciplinarians. (“Eat your vegetables before dessert.”) It is the hard, unwelcome responsibility of the church to be utterly out of sync with its culture, to insist on a unique season of focus and renewal, and just at the peak holiday season.

But it’s tough. Advent tones of longing, waiting, lamenting, and asking can’t hold a Christmas candle to the fa-la-la-la-la that bursts onto the scene between Halloween and Thanksgiving. It is counter-cultural to delay the carols for four weeks of reflections about what we mortals most desperately need. It can feel downright un-American to wait in darkness during the pre-Christmas frenzy or to preach that our deepest longings will not be satisfied with gifts purchased at the mall or online. Let’s not forget the internal tension within our hymnals, many of which contain far more singable, familiar Christmas carols than Advent hymns. Nor can we overlook the choir’s seasonal cantata. John the Baptist may show up in Handel’s Messiah, but only as a warm-up act. Most choral works during Advent “spill the beans” too quickly and move us into Christmas prematurely.

A crowning blow against Advent is that after Christmas the vast majority of our congregations are over the river and through the woods to Grandmother’s house, including many pastors (which is why the Sunday after Christmas is wryly referred to as “National Associate Pastors Week”). Few of the faithful are present to mark the twelve days of Christmas, so it’s squeeze it in before Christmas or forget it.

What to do?

Some churches split the difference, holding out for Advent-ish services in the first two weeks, then yielding weeks three and four to Christmas. Others just give in and start singing about Baby Jesus even before the leftover Thanksgiving turkey is gone.

So why does the Christian calendar retain this anachronistic Advent custom of posing questions of waiting and watching in a culture that prefers well-wishing and whimsy? Why the charade? We know the punch line already. Every child knows what’s wrapped up in the tiny box atop the creche’s manger. Why pretend as if we are looking and waiting for something that arrived 2,000 years ago? Is Advent simply, at best, an exercise in liturgical deferred gratification? Or is it, at worst, a form of theological sadism?

Advent as Primal Hope and Warning

The church has historically insisted on Advent before Christmas in order to bear witness to the inconvenient truth that the most significant act of defiance to be mustered in the face of life’s confusion and destruction is for a people to be shaped,

again, by the primal hope that there is more in this life. Or as Marcus Borg would write, "More."

We need Advent because we need to be reoriented into the hope that is foundational to all that faith is predicated on: God. Advent refuses to analyze or explain God's existence. Instead, Advent makes the bold pronouncement that, though darkness surrounds us, the God of Torah and prophets is not done. Advent plays the long game. It waits, like spectators at a close ballgame, for the next breakthrough, the next movement, the next flurry of action on the scene. Its words of longing, impatience, and pleading reveal our undergirding conviction that there is God, and this God is not relegated to the confines of history.

As we Advent-wait, we do what we can to insure our eyes and ears are attuned to what might come, in order to avoid missing the Arrival and feeling left at the altar, so to speak. Like hunters in a deer blind, we have an expected stretch of waiting on our hands before The Arrival, time that can be employed to review the possibilities, to ask about prior sightings, to double-check our readiness, to examine whether we are standing in the best place to glimpse The Coming. For we have been warned repeatedly that it is entirely possible for the Holy One to arrive and for those who presume they are waiting faithfully to miss the arrival entirely.

But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. (Luke 12: 39-40)

Or the fate of the foolish bridesmaids:

But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. (Matthew 25: 6-13)

Or the warning implicit in the instructions to the sent-out disciples:

Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, "Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near." (Luke 10: 8-11)

These passages encourage vigilance and vision; their intent is not to discourage

or demean or even to primarily cause distress. They are calls to awareness. “Be ready and willing to watch outside your prescribed God-box,” these passages invite. “Cast your gaze far but also near; make it wide-angle but also telescopic. Look with your eyes, but also listen with your ears. Be open to surprise (“God’s other name,” as John Claypool used to say). And have patience and endurance.”

Advent as Birthright

The faithful church must doggedly retain Advent as our opening season, like Naboth refusing to yield his homeland to Ahab’s political and financial pressure. For without Advent, we forfeit our foundational birthright as a people who wait in hope for One who comes and acts and does among us what we cannot act or do for ourselves. The faithful church knows its need to reboot itself each year with Advent, to reset its hoping spirit, to insure that our waiting has not deteriorated into doddering or doodling. We must not, like Nero, fiddle while our Rome burns. We must not miss The Coming, for we are today’s poets and prophets, called to announce to our oblivious and preoccupied culture what we detect happening in our very midst.

We’re not naive. We recognize how often Advent is overlooked or obliterated. Sixteenth century artist Peter Brueggel’s painting, *Numbering at Bethlehem*, depicts a wide-angle scene of a Flemish village as it would have appeared in his day, complete with a church spire. The villagers are busy: skating on the frozen pond, talking over the fence, slaughtering a pig, queuing up to pay taxes at the inn. Amidst the hubbub, one barely notices a woman heavy with child, riding on a donkey toward the inn, her carpenter husband walking alongside with a saw hanging from his belt. Here is a poignant, Advent moment. The Holy Family is coming into the midst of the people. That they overlook the moment is not because the people are bad or blind; rather, it is because their eyes and ears are not attuned to the Advent hope that the Holy might come among them and transform their priorities and pleasures.

Advent preaching needs an air of waiting for that which has not yet appeared, or that which appeared in the past but has been too long in returning. As such it hints of impatience, but the dominant theme is more of an active expectation, a yearning hopefulness, a deep-seated conviction that it’s not time to give up or go home yet. Advent preaching announces: Something is coming, something more, a wild card will be thrown, like in Uno, that will reverse the course of how things are heading now, something that will feed our deepest hungers and bring joy to our most profound griefs. Something sacred, beyond our control and frame. It’s been here before; it will show up again. Any time. Maybe now.

Preaching Advent hope transcends optimism or wishful thinking because it is grounded in the coming of God in history, in the narrative that has become “the story we find ourselves in,” as Brian McLaren’s book title suggests. This Advent posture doesn’t speak with the cocky certainty of the gambler who has counted the cards and knows what’s coming next. Rather, Advent hope emanates from a deep-seated confidence that the Holy One whose appearance has been experienced and recorded by God’s people in the past will continue to appear in the fullness of time, even if followers of the dominant narrative are incapable of seeing it is so.

Challenges to Advent Hope

As Walter Brueggemann has observed throughout his career, the alternative, sacred

experiences of God's people are constantly called into question by the adherents to the dominant narrative. The challenge to believing in God is constant—often subtle, sometimes overt. It picks away at any hope that there is something more at work in creation or in the history of humanity. This containment and belittling of a real God-based hope is found in the corners of our adoration of technology, our military-sponsored security, our addiction to guns, our materialism, our competition on athletic and academic fields of play, even within the church, the group presumably dedicated to promoting God—as it seeks acceptance within the larger culture by jettisoning its birthright of hope in God.

Regrettably, an insecure church's attempt to engender hope in God is as convincing as the printing of the phrase "In God We Trust" on the very currency upon which our culture actually places its hopes. Outsiders see through the charade. Hope becomes like Santa Claus and reindeer, an icon of bygone days, often without any awareness by those who show up each week to be addressed by scriptures and sermons about hope. The result can be a recitation of "what God did" without any hopeful expectation that the narratives upon which we ground ourselves convey "what God is doing" and "what God will do."

It's not that we are bad people or disbelieving people; we are, however, hope-less people. Hope wasn't abandoned; it was misplaced by distracted people who are constantly bombarded by invitations to place their hope in other, more tangible, tactile, technological wonders. We are, as was the audience of Isaiah, "like sheep that have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way" (Isaiah 53:6).

But we are not dumb sheep. We intuit that hope is paired with change (as Sarah Palin noted during the 2012 presidential campaign, "How's that hope-y, change-y thing workin' for ya?"). There will be new orders, new arrangements, new priorities, which is fine, as long as that change happens "out there," not "in here." We are fine with a hope which implies that others will be changed, likely being conformed to our carefully crafted values and vision. But what if, as Advent texts suggest, the change includes us, even originates in us? What if the change is far more interior than exterior, how we see rather than what is seen? As someone has noted, "People don't dislike change; they dislike being changed."

Preaching the Hope

So preaching Advent hope to begin a new year within the Christian story is not only chronologically correct, it is culturally compulsory for the faithful preacher. It demands that the preacher first experience, then proclaim the promise that the One "who began a good work in you will bring it to completion" (Philippians 1:6).

The faithful preacher helps the congregation recognize that their lives have become hope-less (not hopeless!), both individually and collectively. Granted, there will be exceptions in every worshiping community (thanks be to God), but those exceptions will tolerate and appreciate the naming of the hope-lessness that pervades our culture, and perhaps our churches. The rest of the congregation needs to hear the word of hope: God is not done.

On the other hand, this call to rekindle our hope may surprise or offend some parishioners. They may assume that their attendance during Advent places them several steps in front of those who will only show up for the Christmas Eve services, and certainly far ahead of those who have fallen completely into the Christmas

orgy of materialism on Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving. It does not occur to them that they might go about the rituals of Advent—the wreath, the Christmon tree, the absence of the alleluias—without ever addressing the primal need for the reestablishment of Advent hope, that God is not done, as the foundation for all that will follow in the year, and more importantly, all that might reinterpret the various challenges that comprise their individual lives and the corporate lives of their church and culture.

Well-preached Advent hope may surprise some. It is entirely possible that many who hear an Advent sermon can't name an experience of God acting in their lives. They live without hope because they've not been trained to look for and name the acting of God in their lives nor to hope for God in the future.

So Advent preaching will help the congregation see the gracious presence of God where we failed to notice or name God before. It also unearths our deeper longing for reconciliation, healing, justice, in a word: salvation, that was buried beneath the lesser tasks of the short run that demand our attention--from the politics of the day, to the economy (micro and macro), to immigration, racism, campaign finance reform, all the way to whether to renovate the church's children's wing at this time).

Advent preaching remains in the center of the text, not wandering off to peripheral issues of lesser importance, but honing the hope of a future reshaped by the presence and potency of God. Faithful preaching exhorts the congregation toward a renewed vision of where God leads us, toward possibilities that seem a pipe-dream if considered in isolation. In community and in covenant with God, however, they begin to form something new among us.

One hears the hope in the prophets:

In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; 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. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord! (Isaiah 2: 2-5)

Despite Judah's leaders' failure to lead wisely and courageously; despite the empty rituals that characterized Israel's worship; despite acting on its own, living by its own values, falling to its own anxieties, creating its own alliance, there remains the vision of restoration and realignment that is only possible with God. Though we turned away God, God returns to us to finish the work of creation. God is not done; reality cannot be defined simply by the context we find ourselves in.

Transforming Hope

Hope's power came to life in the aftermath of the bombing at this year's Boston Marathon. How ought we feel, much less respond to, such a vile act? What do we

do with our outrage and our sense of abhorrence at this ungodly disregard for life's sanctity? Should we be afraid of every stranger, every crowd? Should we exact revenge? Where do we even stand emotionally? Does "Love your enemies" apply to this situation? Is it even possible to engage the mindset that so disapproves of the world as it is interpreted that it justifies conceiving and carrying out such intentional destruction and grief? We recognize that there is a battle being fought, though the boundaries, the enemy, and the reason for the conflict are vague and amorphous. We are on a side, though our role and our weapons for defense and offense are unclear.

We preach of faith, hope, and love. Written on a page these words look limp in the face of words like bombs, terror, and death. And yet when activated, they carry their own punch. Faith names the active presence of life's sacredness that continually gives birth to powerful possibilities. Hope plays the long-game and is not dependent on winning every skirmish in the battle. It reminds us that we are part of a whole that will continue long after our work is done. Love is heaven's lightening in a bottle. It illuminates the atrocity, exposes the evil, and like the sun, it activates life. It reminds us we cannot be content simply to "get those bastards who did this," but compels us to apply love's lightening to every dark place that breeds the germs of hate and fear. This is sacred work. It begins in Advent as faith calls forth hope in God that makes love possible.