

Apocalyptic Christmas

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I have tended to view my role as a preacher to take the familiar and to make it unfamiliar in order that it might be re-familiarized in a fresher, perhaps even what might be considered a more biblical, manner for the hearer. Nowhere is this challenge greater than in the accepted texts of Advent. This is not a challenge of originality, much less novelty. The goal of preaching is not to tread new ground, but old. Yet the Christmas story does pose a particular pitfall. The ground of these texts may have gotten so rutted by constant treading that we fail to aid our congregations in looking up from that ground in order to discover the apocalypse that Christmas hails, the advent not just of a baby, but of a new world, blazing beyond our ruts. Or, even more dangerously, might we tend to remain in our ruts in order to avoid the advent of such a new world altogether?

None of these are new challenges for the preacher. Indeed, we meet them head-on, 52 times per year. But the intensive, embedded nature of the Christmas season within our western cultures may provide a unique opportunity to journey beyond our conventional roles as exegetes, counselors, and historians. I want to propose that approaching these texts and their relationship to our own society, as cultural anthropologists may represent a fruitful method for unlocking new impact. For if, as I suggest, Advent is an apocalyptic event, definitively breaking from the old world to invite us into the new, the tools of cultural anthropology can assist us in perceiving the inner-workings of these worlds. I hope that such perception will then fill us with the courage that is all too often lacking in staid Advent preaching, the audacity “to tell as much of the truth as one can bear, and then a little more.”¹

Christmas and Cultural Anthropology

The Advent texts are a cultural anthropologist’s dream. In the libraries of ancient literature, there is perhaps no more famous (or easily accessible) crossroads of the clashing of cultures, the richness of symbols, the diverse layers of human traditions stretching into the Hebrew, Roman, and Hellenistic worlds. Then, of course, there are the alternate lives that these texts have breathed in and through the consciousness, the liturgies, the political, familial, and social dynamics throughout Christian history. Interestingly, when we put on our cultural anthropologist’s “hat,” we not only cast light upon these historical and contemporary realities, but we also find that the vital shift we seek to make as preachers, from familiarity to apocalypse, is mirrored in the discipline of cultural anthropology itself.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the discipline of cultural anthropology was restfully entrenched in structural-functionalism as the accepted lens for viewing human societies. The structural-functionalist view, now typically called functionalism, operated like an anthropological camera, providing a comprehensive snapshot of a given society. Such snapshots depicted an achieved equilibrium in which the various components of culture mysteriously worked together to achieve balance.² In the functionalist viewpoint, culture itself takes on the role of independent organism into which persons, institutions, and symbols fit. Thus, and in general, the “ideal”

societies tip toward static convention and the continuity of societal institutions.

Then, in the heyday of functionalist momentum, the world went to war. The Great Depression ravaged complacent capitalism. From the supposedly Christianized southeastern United States, civil unrest began to stir. Cultural anthropologists took notice of the fact that equilibrium didn't seem to be the glue that it was once, and they looked for other lenses. The most readily available—conflict theory—proved to be the silver bullet for dethroning functionalism. Popularly associated with Karl Marx, conflict theory considers the glue holding together a given culture to be not a shared system of *consistent* values, norms, and structure, but an ongoing battle between *inconsistent* values, norms, and structures. While conflict theory held great allure, even romance, it largely exhausted itself by feeding on the same raw material as functionalism, unconsciously sharing its presuppositions about the centrality of institutions and the functionality of conflict. Yet out of this logjam a new discipline emerged, rife with possibility for the preacher.

Symbolic theorists, the most famous being the “Sociology of Knowledge,” called into question the manner in which the former theories invested human cultures with an independent distance from the persons within them. With an emphatic recognition that people operate on the basis of the symbols that they attach to reality, symbolic theory seeks to map out these symbols as the primary means by which society is ordered. Peter Berger famously considered this “symbolic universe” to be the highest level of organization whereby symbols form their own systems of meaning as they embrace and account for institutional order.³ This symbolic universe holds knowledge itself captive, which in turn legitimates a society's institutions. When a society's symbols — its body of shared assumptions — come into question, the symbolic universe begins to break down, and a different symbolic universe must be sought.

Is this trajectory of the study of cultural anthropology—from functionalism to symbolism—not also the continuum that we Advent preachers inhabit? Surely we preachers have known the safe world of functionalism at points in our lectionary. Functionalism is King Solomon's cultural lens, where the Proverbs always come true despite outrageous conscription rates. Functionalism is the lens of the Deuteronomists, a lens of predictable prose that must be added to Job's untamed poetry in order to achieve equilibrium. Functionalism is often the lens of our parishioners who expect, even demand, some divine blessing to offset suffering. Such a world does not reach outside itself for answers. Answers are fairly easy to come by in the functionalist “world without end,” and Apocalypse is impossible.

The symbolic lens, however, is more complex, more able to listen to diverse voices. The symbolic lens understands that the culture is not on a quest for balance, but for meaning. As full-fledged practitioners of the symbolic lens, twenty-first century persons are on a manhunt for meaning, a manhunt that we Christians claim is met in Jesus Christ. But we do not believe that such a claim can make sense in the old symbolic universe. That world has been trashed by the apocalypse of Christmas, replaced by God's re-ordered world.

The most significant difference this distinction makes for the preacher is this: *the preacher of the functionalist world arises on Christmas morning to welcome Jesus into our conventional world. But the preacher of the apocalypse is welcomed by the Advent texts into God's new world and must struggle with an unconventional set of symbols, categories, and value in order to adjust.* What is at stake, of course, is not

just the meaning of Christmas. The meaning of Christianity itself is on the line.

The Symbolic Universe(s) of Christmas

The Advent texts represent a warzone of symbolic universes. On the one side stand the conventional imperial powers. By enacting the conventions of tribute, census, worship, and authority, conventions depicted and echoed in the Advent texts, the Caesars mediated a powerful symbolic universe. This symbolic universe was entrenched and seemingly unquestioned. "All went to their own towns to be registered," passive in the face of the Rome's functionalist precision.

This precision included Rome's program to disseminate not just its authority, but its symbolic ideology into every facet of Hebrew life. Warren Carter describes this ideology as the claim that "Rome exercised sovereignty over the world, that Rome and the emperor manifested the presence of the gods, that the emperor and imperial officials were agents of the gods, and that Rome manifested the gods' blessings in constituting societal well-being."⁴ Jewish persons during the time of the birth of Christ needed only to look upon the golden eagles affixed to Herod's temple in Jerusalem to be reminded that they were far from immune from Rome's symbols, even at the epicenter of their sacred space. The battle between symbolic universes is easily illustrated in Josephus' wrenching story of Herod's last days, in which the rumor of his impending death sparked a group of Torah students to tear down the golden eagles, enthusiastically supported by the Jerusalem crowds. Unfortunately for them, Herod was not quite dead and ordered them burned alive.⁵

Advent arrives within the very teeth of Rome's totalitarian symbolic universe that attempted to co-opt the city of Jerusalem. It arrives in conflict with Herod, Rome's henchman. Is this not why God must show up in podunk Bethlehem among shepherds and innkeepers and teenage girls, those most schooled in "the arts of resistance?" Is this not why the stars that conventionally hailed the birth of the Caesars now realign to hover above the manger? Is this not the meaning of the *Magnificat*, the song of Zechariah, the prophecy of Simeon? "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly." Jesus is born, and an apocalypse has occurred. A new symbolic universe, a new world entirely, has supplanted the old!

Christmas as Comfort

Unfortunately, our society, hell-bent on comfort at all costs, is in no mood for a new Christmas world. Like the largely passive citizenry of ancient occupied Palestine, we remain immune to the apocalyptic edge of Advent. As a result, preaching Advent hope so easily devolves into a message of comfort that is compatible with our culture's symbolic universe. This conformist message capitulates to the individualism, materialism, timelessness, and boundaries of empire.

"Just remember, the true spirit of Christmas is in your heart," Santa Claus says at the ideological climax of *The Polar Express*. Such hyper-individualism is the penultimate message of comfort to a society that believes in autonomy over authority, with the self as the moral, autonomous center.⁶ It transforms Advent from an event to a feeling completely owned by one's personal tastes.

"Christmas is a time for giving," the commercials will tell us, and preachers, following suit, neuter our imagination of the birth of Christ from an apocalypse into a tidy Christmas present. It is so much more palatable that way, a chaser to our society's

sedative of materialism.

Department store chains massage their way into our consciousness by stripping away biblical language. In Manhattan last year, I was shocked to see an entire advertising campaign utilizing the stark word “Believe.” Believe in what? This dearth of history should call us preachers to the Christmas symbols that emerge first from the material: a stone manger, a serious tax burden on the poor, a messianic minority report in the shadow of a despotic ruler.

“Happy holidays,” the greeter at the Wal-Mart says on cue, and preachers decry some sort of nostalgic loss, solidifying conventional boundaries between insider Christians and outsider “secularists.” This is little more than the nationalism of empire, the attempt to resurrect Constantine’s dead bones.

These examples are attempts to welcome the Christ child into our functionalist world. They say to Jesus, in essence, “We are comfortable with our world and are happy that you have come to help us better succeed within it.” Even biblical scholarship has gotten in on the act with prominent writers morphing the infancy narratives into “parabolic overture” in support of a nonmiraculous, liberal Protestant Jesus.⁷ Thankfully, we need not resign our preaching to this functionalist world.

Christmas as Apocalypse

The infancy narratives provide the preacher with the raw materials for a new symbolic universe that begins to construct God’s new world. The Advent texts, therefore, are apocalyptic, not comforting in nature. This is in line with what we know about the apocalyptic genre within the canon itself. John Collins lists the Scriptural functions of apocalypticism. They include providing “support in the face of persecution, reassurance in the face of culture shock or social powerlessness, reorientation in the face of national trauma, consolation for the fate of humanity.” Rather than any sort of flight from concrete reality, Collins asserts that apocalypticism “is a way of coping with reality by providing a meaningful framework within which human beings can make decisions and take action.”⁸ The function of apocalyptic thought then is well-suited both to the historical context of the infancy narratives as well as the violent clash of conceptual systems illuminated by symbolic theory. In the discordant space created in this clash, the preacher can invite the hearer to reconsider our social construction of reality by reminding the hearer that through the incarnation, God physically lays claim to the world in order to redeem it and to invite us to inhabit it anew.

What might this habitation look like? How does the Christmas story lead us into God’s new world? I will propose three ways. First, the apocalyptic message of Christmas mocks the “therapeutic, technological, consumer militarism that permeates every dimension of our common life”⁹ “In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree,” and such a decree was no joke. Augustus, “the august/revered one,” remains widely recognized as one of the most successful empire-builders in human history. His first-person funerary inscription brags of unprecedented taxes raised, armies conquered, peace secured, and honors lavished.¹⁰ Much of this success was achieved via the power of symbol. As many commentators have observed, the Caesars held power through mediating a particular “symbolic universe” which infiltrated all aspects of their administrative agenda, comprising language, architecture, coinage, entertainment, and literature.¹¹ Against such a backdrop, it is hard to shake Frederick Buechner’s startling Christmas contrast:

Insofar as [Augustus] is remembered at all, most people remember him mainly because at some point during his reign, in a rundown section of one of the more obscure imperial provinces, out behind a cheesy motel among cowflops and moldy hay, a child was born to a pair of upcountry rubes you could have sold the Brooklyn Bridge to without even trying.¹²

In the Christmas texts, a new set of symbols replaces golden eagle, laurel wreath, throne, scepter, triumphal procession. Christmas power is found in ostracism, illegitimacy, swaddling clothes, and, perhaps above all, singing.

Second, the apocalyptic message of Christmas creates a new class of insiders. The fact that taxation is at the center of Luke's story has a symbolic meaning that can be illuminated by historical inquiry. Marcus Borg has argued extensively that the virtual caste system represented in the Israel of the gospels is true to what we know from other sources and that the stratification can best be explained by the tithe system.¹³ As Rome ratcheted up the tribute requirements, utilizing a highly successful network of tax gatherers, a clean line separated the devout from the dirty. Those who could no longer pay the tithe were relegated to the margins of religious society, evidenced in the caste of *am ha-aretz*, the "people of the land." The later Mishnah includes rabbinic calls for the *am ha-aretz* to be gutted like fish.¹⁴

Into this milieu arrives the universality of the Christmas message. Simeon proclaims the reach of this divine bombshell: "a light for revelation to the nations, and for glory to your people Israel." In the Advent texts, this blessing extends especially to the outsiders: to Mary, unexpectedly pregnant; to Joseph, disobeying the Torah yet still named a "righteous one," to shepherds, whom Philo notes, "are held mean and inglorious...most of all in the eyes of kings."¹⁵ Now a king of the grand reversal is born, a king of wondrously open commensality. Does not this king convict us of the comfortable borders that we patrol?

Third, the apocalyptic message of Christmas combats timeless individualism with ancient story. Part of an effective symbolic universe is the role of story. The symbolic story of Rome was no exception to this rule. "The birthday of the divine Augustus was the beginning for the world of the gospel," the province of Asia decreed, shortly before the birth of Jesus.¹⁶ Thus inaugurated the story of the first century Empire, a story of Rome's golden age hailed by the stars that fatefully appeared each time a new Caesar was born. Hear the Advent texts laugh: Rome's stories aren't old enough. They are novelties, new and light-hearted inventions.

Like a family Christmas tree filled with ornaments transformed into family heirlooms by time, Advent texts invite us to plant our hearing of Christmas in older stories. "Don't just read," Matthew begs. "Pick up each ornament, each element of the story. It is an invitation to an older story." Matthew speaks of this invitation in the terms of the fulfillment, the ultimate reflection, of Scripture. Amidst all the wrangling over whether or not Matthew 1:23 mistranslates Isaiah 7:14, we often miss the point. "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet!" Matthew has reframed history. It is such a short leap from the Christmas story to the full-blown apocalyptic worldview of Paul. "For the present form of this world is passing away...."

Choosing God's Symbolic Universe

One of the most repulsive stories that has awakened something in the American consciousness is the story of three women, held captive for a decade in a home in suburban Cleveland, Ohio. I do not want to downplay this atrocity, but given the fact that over one million slaves remain in captivity around the world, perhaps this story struck such a nerve not because it is shocking, but because it represents a greater sense. This sense is the observation of artist James Turrell, "The world is not one we receive but one we create."¹⁷ It is the sense that the world we have socially constructed from the symbolic universe we have ingested is little more than myth, lie, locked cage. Jesus does not need to be invited into such a world. Such a world does not need to be comforted, but rather revealed for what it is. Such a world is in need of an apocalyptic unveiling that we may break free into God's new world.

Whatever Christmas looked like, Mary "was safely delivered of a son," to use the Queen's English. Let our preaching not re-create this into another sweet scene. For those with courage, this birth was a foretaste of something bigger, a new symbolic universe that protests the old. God's new symbolic universe was safely delivered in the apocalyptic travail of the splitting away of the old universe. May we preachers choose the right universe.

Notes

1. James Baldwin, "As Much Truth As One Can Bear," in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Pantheon, 2010), 28.
2. The resolution of any discrepancy, whether in values, activity or cognition, is believed to be both needful and desirable as well as the ordinary thrust of 'normal' human behavior." Bruce Malina, "Normative Dissonance and Christian Origins," in *Social-Scientific Criticism of the New Testament and its Social World*, ed. John H. Elliott (Decatur, GA: Scholars Press, 1986), 40-42.
3. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966).
4. Warren Carter, "James C. Scott and New Testament Studies: A Response to Allen Callahan, William Herzog, and Richard Horsley," in *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance: Applying the Work of James C. Scott to Jesus and Paul*, ed. Richard Horsley (Atlanta: SBL, 2004.), 92.
5. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17.6.3-4.
6. See Richard Sennett, *Authority* (New York: Knopf, 1980), 84-121.
7. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus's Birth* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 34-35.
8. John J. Collins, "Apocalypses and Apocalypticism," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 287.
9. Walter Brueggemann, *Mandate to Difference: An Invitation to the Contemporary Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 192.
10. See *Res gestae divi Augusti* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1924.
11. See Joshua Rice, *Paul and Patronage: The Dynamics of Power in 1 Corinthians* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick, 2013), 45.
12. Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 2004), 54.
13. Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987), 84-87.
14. A'Haron Oppenheimer, *The Am Ha-aretz: A Study in the Social History of the Jewish People in the Hellenistic-Roman Period* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 176.
15. Philo, *On Husbandry*, 61.
16. *OGIS*, 458.
17. Richard Lacayo, "Prince of Light: How Artist James Turrell Conquered the Heavens" *Time* (July 1, 2013): 42.