

Musings on Advent

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Juxtapositions

Early in ministry, I served as an associate in a large congregation. Through the whims of the preaching schedule, I preached the second Sunday of Advent four years in a row. For multiple, consecutive seasons, I wrestled with the fiery passion of John the Baptist, preaching equally fiery sermons about such cheerful subjects as sin, repentance, and the demanding way of God, sermons I naively believed might actually change the world. But then came the autumn of the sniper attacks throughout the Washington, D.C. area, coupled with several devastating deaths in the congregation and then the build up to the Iraqi war. When the Sunday rolled around yet again, I turned to scriptures I had studied before, reading “Prepare the way of the Lord,” and in a moment of existential crisis, realized I did not believe God’s good kingdom would ever come. The prophets might promise all flesh will see the salvation of God, but daily life would not look much different this year than last. War would still be viewed as the best path to peace, urban deserts would persist in impoverished neighborhoods, families would be torn apart for all kinds of reasons, and regardless of how early we hung the Christmas lights, we would still wait for a long time in the dark.

Ten years after that moment of disillusionment, I am now serving as the pastor of another congregation, living in a new city with my husband and our children. At this point, Advent contains a whirlwind of activity through which I hold my breath, hoping we survive until December 25. There are devotional books to compile, special services to lead, and Christmas Eve worship to plan. There are pageant rehearsals, staff Christmas lunches, and poinsettia placement debates.

It was late in Advent the night I walked through the sanctuary after yet another church event, ready to turn off lights and head home. The two trees stood on either side of the altar, dark green against the white walls. The Advent wreath candles burned, casting their light into the pews. The poinsettias had been settled into place, tucked under the trees and into perches near the ceiling. The sanctuary looked stunningly beautiful: calm, quiet, and expectant. The space seemed to ask, “God, are you coming soon?” and to answer in the affirmative. So loud was the message that I called home, coaxed my husband to get the kids out of bed and walk them over in their pajamas so that we could share the sacred space together.

Placed alongside each other, these two experiences embody Advent. The season is a mixture of weariness and anticipation, of waiting and actively readying for an arrival, of cynicism born from disappointment and persistent hope that promises will be fulfilled. Over the weeks of preparation, the world is judged for its failures to fill the hungry with good things or to remove the too powerful from their thrones. And over the weeks, the world’s dreams are nourished, as ones who know night sense just enough of the coming dawn to hold on a little longer. The Advent preacher enters this overflowing space with the task of shepherding a congregation through its complicated crevices. Amid a well-rehearsed, beloved season, she or he steers the listeners towards darkness in order to catch the light, towards pain in order to learn of longing, towards sin in order to experience salvation. The preacher’s tools include

a host of familiar Biblical characters. Isaiah, that monumental prophet of Israel will speak, as will Micah, Jeremiah, and Zephaniah. Paul will add his voice, and near the end, Zachariah, Elizabeth, Gabriel, Joseph, and Mary will make their entrances. The preacher's work is strengthened by a growing momentum in the congregation as sermons are offered alongside the choir singing "Comfort, o comfort my people," the children placing an empty manger on the altar, and unexpected faces finding their place in the pews. With all the expectation in the air, it's a weighty time to preach and a privileged one as well.

Liturgical scholar Gordon Lathrup argues worship happens when two opposing elements are brought together.¹ Meaning is born in the juxtapositions of sacred text and meal, silence and speech, praise and petition. Just as holy people are transformed by encountering the One who is truly holy, the combining of these ancient things calls forth new hope. We who long for the hope contained in Advent live amid contradictory experiences. We want God to come just as we resist being transformed by the refiner's fire. We dream of mountains being made low and valleys being lifted up just as we ask like Zechariah, "How will I know that this is so?" Preaching in Advent invites the juxtaposition of anticipation and doubt, hope and disappointment, darkness and light. It asks preachers to place the grim statistics of our violent world alongside visions of God's peaceable kingdom. For in the juxtaposition, holiness erupts. Traversing the arc of the Advent message, the preacher contains the contradictions. As second coming leads back to first birth, judgment looks forward to promise, and repentance harkens into joy, the Advent path shows redemption at work. This is a familiar path, but like God's promises that are new every morning, it is worthy of another journey.

The Second Coming

Advent begins with contemplation of the second coming. Christ's return is a jolting notion to ponder. Preachers can be slightly embarrassed by the texts assigned for the first Advent Sunday. Often coming at the end of a holiday weekend, with its Black Friday shopping sprees and evergreens tied to car rooftops, the day's images are of the sun becoming dark, fire raining down, and thieves knocking at the door. The world is awash with Christmas, and we are asked to face the end of time. However dark the scriptures, they point towards redeeming our days. Be alert, they cry, for by watching closely, you will discern the time.

Modern society lives intimately attuned to time. My smart phone serves as a stopwatch at my son's 5k race, an alarm when I'm traveling, and an audio calendar pinging about my next appointment. We bemoan how short the days are by lamenting, "If only I had the time." But Advent's time is different than living imprisoned by our calendars. Advent invites us out of our jail cells into cosmic time, when the God in and beyond time shows us the divine end for creation. You do know what time it is, writes Paul. The night is far gone; the day is near.

Early in our marriage, my husband and I spent Thanksgiving weekend with his family. Traveling home we bantered about whose relatives would provide the more stressful holiday. I suggested it would be the one who needed three kinds of potatoes to keep the peace. He countered with my family's requirement for proficiency in sports trivia in order to earn a place at the table. It was a light-hearted conversation, but one hinting at the systems that shape us and the ways we are embedded in things to which we remain unaware. Arriving home that evening, I glanced at the newspaper

headlines, skimming a story about the then current humanitarian crisis in Darfur. The situation came suspiciously close to genocide, even as the world community remained unable to name it as such. Similar silent avoidance has happened in subsequent years, including the present tragedy in Syria and the flood of refugees pouring into Europe. Against our inclinations towards ignorance and blindness, Advent calls forth our awareness, urging us to notice the time in which we live.

The truth of our present time only comes into focus when juxtaposed by visions of God in Christ returning to right wrongs and reconcile what is broken. Christ's second coming proclaims that in the end—whenever and however the end arrives—everything finds its completion in God's realm. Christ's birth says the same thing from the opposite direction. God enters human history to make it possible for human lives to strive towards that completion, offering the fullness of their beings in service to God's vision. So Advent time, God's time of first birth and second coming, teaches us the beginning and the end are joined. One feeds our understanding of the other. Alert to the truth that all life will find its end in God, we enact that ending through lives that name systems, are alert to injustice, and fight against the world's relentless messages of death. Whenever we struggle to live such truths, preparing for Christ's birth opens the space in us where God enters, reassuring us that we do not labor unaided.

Repentance

Being alert to the time necessitates self-awareness. Repentance is a second phase of Advent, those moments when the process of awaking from sleep prompts a close look at one's attitudes, actions, and their implications. The two middle Sundays, comprising half of the season, dwell on the voice crying out in the wilderness to make clear a highway for our God. Preachers cannot escape the subject of sin. John the Baptist calls us a brood of vipers. The judge stands at the door. The messenger purifies like fullers' soap, and a prophet speaks to Israel about paying her penalty. But the subject of sin is the beginning rather than the end of the conversation. John the Baptist's message aims towards the forgiveness of sins. Isaiah reminds the people that their penalty will dissolve into the Lord's favor. The challenge of Advent becomes naming repentance in a way that enables actual transformation without becoming so engrossed with the transgressions—so in love with the sinning—that salvation cannot come near.

In her memoir *Lit*, Mary Karr recounts a harrowing tale of her descent into alcoholism and then her recovery. At one point when she's been sober for two months, she remarks that although she feels "fresher inside, albeit a bit scooped out," she does "not feel redeemed."² She says, "I feel fallen, a long way fallen."³ Feeling a long way fallen is an apt description for having faced truthfully the evil we have done to ourselves and to others, the mess we have made with the world. In the months that follow, Karr descends further, spiraling through a depression that culminates in hospitalization. Up to this point, she's resisted those around her who have encouraged her to pray. Unsure of her belief in God, she can't imagine herself praying. But during her first night in the hospital, unable to sleep, she tries. She goes into the bathroom and kneels on the cold tiles. She writes, "I feel small, kneeling there. Small and needy and inadequate. If you're God, I say, you know I feel small and needy and inadequate. And tonight I want a drink. The silence fails to say anything back. It feels like a judgment, the silence."⁴ As she continues kneeling, she thinks of her young son, healthy and safe at

home and of her father whom she adored. Their presence becomes part of her prayer, filling the stillness with gratitude. The memories become a blessing, as love of both son and father push against her soul's despair. She concludes, "The boundaries of my skin grow thin as I kneel there squinting my eyes shut. For a nanosecond, I am lucent."⁵

A pastor-preacher knows the "long way fallen-ness" existing within any congregation. With its images of the crooked being made straight, the rough ways made smooth, and God's people being led home, Advent has a way of bringing the brokenness up to the surface: siblings who haven't spoken in decades, parents mourning children lost to them in every conceivable way, and neighborhoods reeling from racial injustice. Such stories find their way into the pastor's study and the preacher's heart. Recounting our pain-filled story, we are asked to acknowledge our responsibility in the destruction. In the terrifying moment of confessing her failures to save herself, Karr moves closer towards her redemption. Real repentance always exists alongside real change. In the moment of brokenness, the Light pours in.

Hope

Alertness to God's in-breaking time and real repentance accomplishes much in creating room for Christ's light. Advent people, though, don't live separated from the wider world, which treads its own harried path towards Christmas glory. Nurturing hope in God's capacity to enter and alter our darkness is a final Advent task. Hope is a risky, costly endeavor, made riskier by the world's blind greed and more costly by the depth of our dreams.

Washington Post writer Hank Stuever once followed three Texas families between Thanksgiving and New Year's in order to explore modern America's holiday practices.⁶ He met a single mother with her kids stalking the midnight sales, a childless couple laboring over their extravagant yard light display, and a woman decorating the homes of the wealthy as a side business. Each family evidenced the enormous emotional investment poured into the holidays, with its high expectations for bliss and togetherness. Throughout his investigations Stuever found one word consistently reappearing: *believe*. *Believe* is scrolled across shopping bags, monogrammed onto t-shirts, and painted on signs hung over mantels. But what exactly does *believe* signify? What are we to believe? Who are we to believe in?

If the cultural code word for December is *believe*, then the Advent opposite is hope. Advent charges us to hope. Hope, Martin Smith writes, "is about something unexpected reviving us, something fresh and new."⁷ Hope creates meaning, as "the future that is real in God seeps into the present."⁸ Hope awakens us from slumber, pointing us towards the dawn. It proclaims change is possible because God makes things new. Hope says no one is bound by the past because God in Christ has come. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, the future is cared for. We can trust what awaits us because we know what God has already done. The Christmas slogan "Believe" feels akin to optimism, suggesting the only thing standing between you and your desires is your mindset. Hope stands not on human effort but upon divine action. We hope because we know God has acted in past, moves through the present, and can be trusted to act in the future.

By the time we meet Zechariah and Elizabeth, they have stopped believing a baby will join their family. The years have gone by, the gray hairs have sprouted, their

bodies have wrinkled, and the child hasn't come. But I'm not sure they've stopped hoping for a baby. Gabriel's words tell us that they have prayed for a child, just like one might pray for a Christmas without a family fight, a month without a school shooting, or a holiday without hearing the word *relapse*. Past experience might suggest it is worthless to pray for such things, but your heart cries out nonetheless, hoping past hope that this year something might be different. The cry holds a flicker of faith in God's power to revive, the hope that never truly, fully dies.

After Gabriel's visit, Zechariah appears stuck in the need-to-believe realm. How will I know that this is so, he asks. Or, in other words, why should I believe you? Zechariah longs for irrefutable proof, a material sign upon which to hang his trust. Society's enticement to believe subtly suggests what we desire is there for our taking so long as we have the money to buy it or the skill to acquire it. Zechariah wants solid confirmation, something to grasp at the moment of the announcement rather than the difficult task of living in hope, watching for the news to unfold at its own patient pace. His wish is an understandable one because to hope is to risk heartache. Hope inevitably meets disappointment. The dawn's light never comes as quickly as we expect. As a young preacher, I hoped a sermon the Sunday after snipers John Allen Mohammad and Lee Boyd Malvo were captured might roll the tide away from easy access to high powered guns and capital punishment. Thirteen years later, my heart has been broken by too many other lives needlessly lost. Yet I am still hoping.

My experience is that hope, the imprint of God's future alive in our heartfelt imagination, is intrinsic to being human. But hope's staying power is strengthened through practice. The habit of hope develops as we train ourselves to see what God sees: a wolf lying with the lamb, the desert teaming with flowers, and old bodies bursting with new life. Isaiah is the practitioner of hope extraordinaire. In my mind's eye, Isaiah is a bent over man with wisps of white hair just above his ears and wrinkles hiding his eyes when he writes, "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." Perhaps he had been young and optimistic when he answered God's call among the singing seraphs in the temple. But by the time he writes this vision, he has lived long enough to suffer disappointment. He has endured warring neighboring nations. He has given advice to kings seeking guidance and watched his instructions dismissed. He's seen cities razed, the wounded die across a battlefield, and children grow up knowing only war. Isaiah knows something of waiting for a sign from God when the heavens seem disinterested. For him, hope is a tiny plant shooting out from a broken branch. The branch is largely barren, but the new green stem is tenaciously, undeniably there. Hope knows failure. It admits to the vulnerability embedded in human life. But it trusts God hopes alongside God's creatures and dares to live under the promise that every part of creation will be gathered back into God's fold.

While department stories want us to believe we can buy our salvation, Isaiah, Zechariah, and Elizabeth learn the fulfillment of their hopes comes only as God's gift. Each experienced the delicate balance of promises fulfilled and promises yet to be realized. They are forced to live between anticipation and arrival, finding in the gap between what is hoped for and what comes a fertile ground upon which to grow their trust in God. The juxtaposition of hope and disappointment creates a sacred space. Whenever the two meet, cherished longings come keenly into view. What do you want for Christmas? A pastor might ask children this question during the children's

time, knowing the risk of opening the floor to an avalanche of answers. The children's responses might include Barbies, Xboxes, and iPods. Other longings are not easily admitted. I want Mommy and Daddy to live in the same house again. I want Grandpa to not have died. I want more food in the refrigerator. I want a friend to sit with during lunch. Everyone carries such closely guarded, precious longings. The longings themselves are holy, for they are part of the way God's abundant, hospitable, and light-filled kingdom takes root in us. It is a holiness we cultivate by risking hope. When Advent creates space for us to say how we have hoped and been disappointed and what longings we still hold dear, we discover the space growing within ourselves to welcome God's infinite gift of intimate presence.

Last December, I visited an exhibit on Mary, the mother of Jesus. There were scenes of the Annunciation, of mother and child, and of a grieving mother witnessing the crucifixion. The final section held renderings of Mary as the Queen of the Universe, offering herself to those who crowded around her throne just as she had offered her life to God. Looking at these pictures, I wondered how Mary could have predicted all that was to happen after the angel first greeted her. Perhaps in the beginning she could not quite fathom what Gabriel was saying. Who would be prepared for the task of explaining the situation or the fear at having to do so? Surely she wasn't ready to give birth away from home or to allow strangers to visit. But I wager she also wasn't prepared for the joy, the exhilaration of her flesh mingling with God's flesh. For the joy, who would change the journey? The joy of Advent surprises me every year. As weary as God must be, God still has enough hope for the world to enter into it again. As wandering as we are, God still entrusts us with bringing forth Christ's birth. For the joy, who would miss the journey?

Notes

1 Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

2 Mary Karr, *Lit: A Memoir* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 206, 208.

3 Karr, 208.

4 Karr, 275.

5 Karr, 276.

6 Hank Stuever, *Tinsel: A Search for America's Christmas Present* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009).

7 Martin L. Smith, "Hope" in *Nativities and Passions: Words for Transformation* (Boston: Cowley, 1995), 183.

8 Smith, 184.