

Entering into Advent

John B. Rogers, Jr.
Montreat, North Carolina

On the threshold of Advent, we become aware again of how God's movement toward us, God's claim upon us, God's commitment to us permeate the unfolding drama of the Bible. The Psalter gives its ongoing testimony: "O Lord, you have searched me and known me!" (Ps. 139:1). In Genesis God commands Abraham: "Go...to the land that I will show you, and I will make of you a great nation...and by you bless all the families of the earth" (Gen. 12:13). In the Exodus, God vows to be *present* with and for Israel, the promise contained in the divine name, Yahweh—"I am who I *am*... I *will be* there for you/with you" (Ex. 3:14).

In Jesus Christ, God's promised presence comes to full expression—the Word becomes flesh to dwell among us, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). The Risen Christ, in his farewell promise, claims and secures our future with God: "Lo, I am with you always" (Matt. 28:20).

God's movement toward us begins effectively with the creation of heaven and earth. Even "in the beginning," the promise of Christmas is present. Creation already looks toward God's eternal dwelling with humanity. God's love, grace, judgment, and forgiveness are the foundation of the divine intention, not mere afterthoughts. In placing the Genesis account of creation at the beginning ("In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," Gen 1:1) and the vision of a new heaven and a new earth at the end ("And God said... "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end," Rev. 21:6), the Bible constructs the arena for the advent of God.

Our Advent preparation begins properly with an awareness of the encompassing mystery of God to whom we address our invocation: "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel!"

I

In the beginning, God. That is a confession of faith, or better still, a hymn of praise: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." That is not a scientific theory of the beginning of the cosmos. We can converse about the universe in scientific terms with confidence and gratitude. We know that the universe is billions of years old. Mathematics and astronomy, physics and archaeology help us to discover many of its secrets and perhaps to solve problems connected with its origin and evolution. But we will do well to remember that there is a difference between a *problem*, which can be solved with greater knowledge, and a *mystery*, which is enhanced by knowledge. The proper response to a problem is hard work, study, research, and experimentation. The proper response to mystery is wonder, awe, prayer, and worship.

Consider, for example, the problems of disease, natural disaster, and international tension. Many such problems have been and will be solved by scientific research, medical skill, wise and thoughtful diplomacy. But the mystery of life remains and deepens when we experience the birth of a child or live through the death of a loved one. "The closest I have ever felt to God," said my father-in-law, "was when my chil-

dren were born and I held them in my arms, and when my father died.” Some of us remember the moon landing. That event represents a solution to the problem of space exploration. But we also remember the picture of earth taken from the moon—the globe on which we live and die and solve our problems, suspended there in the vastness of space. That blue ball only sharpened the mystery and wonder of our world. Paul Tillich told with delight a question his six-year-old daughter asked. “Why are trees not not?” A botanist may some day know all there is to know about *how* trees are trees, but no botanist as a botanist will ever know *why* there is a tree anyway. “Why are trees not not?” We recall the psalmist’s words: “Out of the mouths of babes...thou hast rebuked the mighty” (Psalm 8:2 NEB).

However many problems we may solve, what can we know about our world that is more important than the following words?

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light....Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness....” So God created humankind... male and female God created them.” (Gen 1:1-3, 26, 27 NRSV)

That is truth which can only be confessed, not explained. The biblical doctrine of creation is calculated neither to explain the origin of the world at some datable moment in the cosmic past nor to describe literally the beginning of time. The Genesis picture of God’s calling the world into being out of nothing is not a scientific statement about a historical event, but a theological confession about the deepest meaning of existence. The Hebrew word translated here “to create” is used only with God as its subject. The implication of that verb choice is that here we have truth far beyond our ability to explain, but not beyond our capacity to confess. It is truth beyond human conceiving, but not beyond our trust. John S. Whale wrote, “The doctrine of creation out of nothing is not a cosmological theory, but an expression of our adoring sense of the transcendent majesty of God, and our utter dependence upon God.”¹ Nor does the theory of evolution affect for one moment the truth that human beings have their origin and essential being in a word addressed to them by God, their Creator.

By beginning with this hymn of praise to God, who called the world into being, the Bible makes us this proposition: it will introduce us to the wisdom and the will, to the grace and the love, to the power and the truth undergirding all knowledge, encompassing all of time. We may believe it or not; that is our decision. Either way: “In the beginning God....” And the stage is set.

II

In the beginning, God. So also, God in the end. Revelation 21 completes the scene. This is the message of the strange and mysterious book of Revelation. In the end, God—with all the reassurance and joy that implies. The scene in Revelation is appropriately cosmic. The whole created order fills this vision of a new heaven and a new earth, conforming in every way to God’s purpose and dominated in every way by God’s presence. It is a glad scene. Individuals are reconciled to God; nature and history are redeemed as well. The message of Revelation is gospel, not gloom! The

Bible does not end with despair, but with a song of God's victory and our hope: "The Lord God omnipotent reigneth!" (Rev. 19:6 KJV); "Behold, the dwelling of God is with mortals. God will dwell with them, and they shall be God's people, and God himself will be with them" (Rev. 21:3).

If we are to hear Revelation's message of hope and triumph, it is important to avoid a literal understanding of its highly symbolic language and imagery. For example, Revelation does not give us a blueprint for the end of time. To use this book to determine when and how the world will end, or to identify who are the saved and how many, or to equate some contemporary political figure with the Antichrist is to misuse it. To argue from Revelation to an exclusive view of humanity's relation to God as though our way, or some particular way, were the only way into God's heart in the end is to miss its meaning altogether. Rather, we should allow the artistry and poetry and music of this book to have its way with us until the sheer, shimmering grace of it melts away any cruel exclusiveness we cling to. Consider, for example, the wonderful imagery in that final vision of the heavenly city in chapters 21 and 22. The judgment of God is real, but we have moved here through and beyond judgment to redemption. There are twelve gates, we are told, and then, "The city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb [Christ]. By its light shall the nations walk...and its gates shall never be shut by day—and there shall be no night there" (Rev. 21:23-25).

What a telling way to show that the gates of God's mercy are ever open! The gates of the city are never closed while it is day, and there is no night! Jesus warned the disciples about wanting to know the "times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority" (Acts 1:7). The consummation of history, its judgment and redemption, is hidden. But like our own lives, it is "hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 2:2 NEB) from beginning to end.

We who would proclaim the triumph of grace in this marvelous book at the end of the Bible shall ever be in the debt of the composer George F. Handel who set it to music in the "Hallelujah Chorus." Its text consists of these verses from Revelation: "Allelujah: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth....The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever....King of Kings, and Lord of Lords" (Rev. 19:6; 11:15; 19:16 KJV).

III

In the beginning, God. In the end, God. And within the encompassing mystery, Emmanuel! Any proclamation and interpretation of this gospel must acknowledge that Emmanuel has to do not only with Christmas and comfort, but also with a cross. *Emmanuel* means "God with us" not merely, or even primarily, to shield us from the dark side of life, but to be with us and to go with us through the valley of the shadow, whether of death or despair, suffering or tragedy. We cannot knit Genesis and Revelation and Jesus into a little creed and then, using it for a security blanket, withdraw, leaving God's world to God. We cannot leave to others the doing of what really needs to be done. This vision of God in the beginning, God in the end, and God with us in Jesus Christ is a call to, not a substitute for, obedient action and faithful living in the world. Paul Scherer declared:

If this vision [we] have of God does not move and drive and pull and

tug and wrench and twist and hold and stride and walk off grimly after God, it is nothing. We stultify it when we use it as a solace and no more. We prostitute it when we hitch it to some private little enterprise against headaches.... This is to take the power of God that swings the stars in their orbits and ask it to do nothing but the household chores.²

The gospel of Emmanuel is something other than a technique for making things easy. "The God who is primarily a helper toward the attainment of human wishes," wrote H. Richard Niebuhr, "is not the being to whom Christ said, 'Thy will, not mine, be done.'" ³ There is a cross at the heart of this faith we profess, and a cry of anguish: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34) and a whispered prayer of utter trust: "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!" (Luke 23:46).

In the story of David, Abigail, who later becomes David's second wife, says to him, "If men rise up to pursue you and to seek your life, the life of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of the living in the care of the Lord your God" (I Sam. 25:29). Something like that is the assurance we are meant to draw from the way the Bible begins and ends. The encompassing mystery graciously upholds and sustains us. In our time, faith, hope, and love are beset by pain and violence. To live by faith may not mean less pain or less distress; the way of faith is not a detour around adversity. Indeed, there are circumstances in which faith seems only to sustain us, to help us endure. Sometimes we can do no more than cling to the faith of others. Sometimes the faith of the church, locally and historically, has to bear us along in our doubt and disability. We are like the paralytic brought to Jesus by his friends. "There are times when I just cannot say the creed," said one of my parishioners. "I'll say it for you until you can say it again," I replied. "Whether or not you were aware of it, there have been times when you have had to say it for me; and I shall probably need you to do so again in the future. That is one thing we mean by 'the communion of saints.' That is one reason we are given to one another in the church." Devout women and men across the ages until now can testify to that. There are times when we may have to refrain from saying to one another, "Keep the faith!" in order to say more appropriately, "Let the faith keep you!"

Furthermore, our calling as Christians is to live against evil, to oppose the woes that afflict humanity, and to stand against their human causes. We cannot responsibly leave misery unalleviated. We dare not stand aloof from what Keats called "the giant agony of the world." To do so is a kind of practical atheism in the face of the good news of a God who created the heavens and the earth, who so loved the world that he gave his only Son, and who shall reign as King of kings and Lord of lords forever and ever. This has always been the courage in which Christians have faced up to evil and faced it down—the assurance that "your life shall be bound in the bundle of the living in the care of the Lord your God."

IV

In the beginning, God; in the end, God. Like anthems of two great choirs, the Genesis hymn of creation and the crescendo of the "Hallelujah Chorus" enfold the cosmos and every creature, the whole of time and every life, in the encompassing mystery of God.

Our preparation for the advent of God begins in silence as we await a word from

beyond ourselves, from within the mystery.

Let all mortal flesh keep silence/ And with fear and trembling stand;
Ponder nothing earthly minded/ For with blessing in his hand,
Christ our God to earth descendeth/ Our full homage to demand.

Out of the encompassing mystery, God comes to us at Christmas—and not as a stranger. As the fourth Gospel puts it, “He comes unto his own.” Even if “his own” will not receive him, as is so often the case with us, the fact remains that in Christ we are God’s own. We are God’s own from the beginning. We have no past existence in which we might have been created and prepared for something other than the grace of God. God claimed us “before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4). We may doubt, deny, or renounce God’s claim, but God will never relinquish this claim. We have no future existence in which we might be destined for something other than God’s judging and redeeming love.⁴

In W. H. Auden’s Christmas Oratorio *For the Time Being*, at the dedication of the infant Jesus, the righteous and devout Simeon declares,

But here and now the Word which is implicit in the Beginning and in the End is become immediately explicit, and that which hitherto we could only *passively* fear as the incomprehensible I AM, henceforth we may *actively* love with comprehension that THOU ART. Wherefore, having seen Him, not in some prophetic vision of what might be, but with the eyes of our own weakness as to what actually is, we are bold to say that we have seen our salvation....And because of His visitation, we may no longer desire God as if God were lacking: our redemption is no longer a question of pursuit but of surrender to Him who is always and everywhere present. Therefore at every moment we pray that, following Him, we may depart from our anxiety into His peace.⁵

So, dear friends, let us with gratitude, confidence, and joy lift our voices as Advent begins: “O come, O come, Emmanuel.”⁶

Notes

1 John S. Whale, *Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge University Press, 1941), 32.

2 Paul Scherer, *Event in Eternity* (New York: Harper and Bros, 1945), 36.

3 H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 36.

4 See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* Vol 3: 1 (Edinburgh: T + T Clark, 1958), 67.

5 W.H. Auden, *For the Time Being* (New York: Random House, 1944), 115, 118.

6 This essay contains material from the author’s book *The Birth of God: Recovering the Mystery of Christmas* (Abingdon Press, 1987).