

Preaching Advent: A Theocentric Approach in an Anxious World

Frederick W. Schmidt

Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois

Work through any good history and it becomes clear that the church's preaching during Advent has often been shaped by the some measure of distress and alarm.¹ That will be the case again this year.² According to the Forewords for this journal, that has been the case in years past³ and that was the case from the beginning, of course. The very texts that frame our preaching during Advent are firmly lodged in days of distress and alarm.

In approaching the task of preaching yet again in this Advent season, awareness and empathy are two of the preacher's great gifts. The preacher who hopes to connect the message preached with the lives of those in the pews needs to be in touch with the events of the day and have the emotional intelligence to speak directly to our anxiety.

Both gifts are also seductions, however, and their power to seduce is magnified by anxiety. A preacher trapped by the complexity of the day's news and by the sense of dis-ease that infects our society will be tempted to draw on the vocabulary and theological formation that has shaped preaching in pulpits now for almost 150 years. For that reason, I will argue that preachers need to take a more theocentric rather than anthropocentric approach to the texts at Advent.

Growing out of the theological debates of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, two mutually polarizing movements have shaped that vocabulary. Reacting to the perceived threat of modernity, fundamentalism emphasized "the importance of self-abnegation in the lifelong struggle against sin."⁴ In reaction to fundamentalism, Protestant liberalism increasingly emphasized and enthusiastically embraced the modern world and the transformation of society.⁵ The contemporary children of both movements, then, offer a stark choice: one of personal salvation, the other the promise of social salvation, and much—though, thankfully not all—of the preaching that we do falls into one camp or the other.

There are flaws to both approaches that the other side is quick to point out. The Fundamentalist emphasis on personal salvation often fails to acknowledge the social dimensions of sin, the comprehensiveness of God's redemptive vision, and appears to postpone real transformation for some kind of "sweet bye and bye."⁶ When navigating society's anxiety, fundamentalists often engage political questions—if they engage them at all—with an eye to securing religious freedom and the values that they cherish. Liberal (or what are now styled as "progressive") Christians, by contrast, are faulted for neglecting questions of theological rigor, individual accountability, and a personal witness to the work of God in their lives.⁷ They are faulted for preaching politics to the exclusion of everything else,⁸ and it is argued that their eschatology amounts to little more than the triumph of a particular social vision.

The validity of those criticisms and the weight of them varies from individual to individual. There are also those who appropriate the emphases of both theological traditions in a fashion that avoids many of the criticisms that are leveled at them.⁹ But

the deeper difficulty with both views — and the defect that both approaches share — lies in the choice to emphasize an anthropocentric rather than a theocentric reading of the biblical message. Victims of a debate that has been theologically defining for both fundamentalists and progressives alike have been anxious to demonstrate the relevance of their respective interpretations of the biblical message, promising that God will either heal our personal lives or heal our society. As a result, both fundamentalists and progressives tend to emphasize God's work on our behalf or our work on God's behalf rather than our participation in the work of God.

The result is a flattening, narrowing, and distorting of the biblical message. Mesmerized by its superiority over the “other camp,” fundamentalism and progressives offer the preacher theological options that begin and end with definitions of God's redemptive work that are defined by our needs, anxieties, and prescriptions for a solution.¹⁰ But the task of preaching the Advent lections lies in asking and answering a subtle but very different question “What is *God* doing and how can we be available to the work of God?”¹¹

The answer to this theocentric question cannot be found by using historical criticism alone. Indeed, the tendency to read Scripture as a collection of not just discreet, but unrelated pieces of literature has robbed us of the ability to offer an answer to a question of this kind.¹² But one way to begin is by contemplating the relationship between Advent, the triune God of Scripture, and the saving acts of God that follow Advent: the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension.¹³

This approach need not and should not replace sound historical critical work with the text. Indeed, as Walter Brueggemann cautions, in reading the Old Testament and in particular the texts from Isaiah, it is important not to “preempt” the message of the prophet in the legitimate effort “to see how the book of Isaiah fed, nurtured, and evoked Christian imagination with reference to Jesus.”¹⁴

However, when that larger theological landscape becomes a part of the picture, several things become clear that serve as the larger narrative of the church's faith: that creation is God's free choice born of God's character, that creation is good and sustained by God, that humankind is made in God's image and is meant to serve as God's vice-regent in the world, and that humanity's desire to be its own god has undermined its ability to serve as God's vice-regent, imperiled the well being of God's creation, and compromised God's claim to be God. The purpose of God's saving acts, then, is to restore the image of God in humankind, invite our participation in the work of healing and restoration begun and completed in the person of Jesus Christ, and establish God's intended reign over all creation.

The story begun in Advent is not all about us. It is about God and about God's intentions for God's world. We are not saved for our own sake or for the sake of our society. We are saved so that we might participate in the work of God. Discipleship takes us back again and again to an encounter with God in order to find clues for the way forward, because that work cannot be captured by our narrow formulations of what might be good for us or for our world. Salvation, peace, righteousness, justice, love, mercy, forgiveness, and grace are experienced in their fullness only in God.¹⁵ With this theocentric reading of the Advent texts in mind, preachers might emphasize a number of themes. What follows are some suggestions.¹⁶

Advent One: Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

With a theocentric reading of the Advent texts in mind, the reading from Isaiah serves well as a place to begin at the beginning: with divine initiative and with the recognition that our narrow construals of God's grace and merciful activity are never adequate. It is also a place to call attention to the importance of asking where and how God is at work in the world, particularly in times of anxiety.¹⁷ Isaiah's plea is both a prayer and a challenge, asking God to act in the unanticipated ways that God has acted in the past (Is 64: 1-5a).¹⁸

Abraham Heschel's description of the prophets as *homo sympathetikos*, as people who long and strain to know the purposes of God, invites us to join them.¹⁹ This is not, as I have heard it so often described, an exercise in "doubting." It is, instead, a candid, vulnerable effort to stand alongside God as discerning witnesses, even when the circumstances we face make that difficult. To grasp both the wonder at God's work and the responsibility to be discerning witnesses to that work invites the church to free itself from enslavement to the tyranny of fear. It also identifies one of the roles that we are invited to play as the people of God.

In a similar fashion, the admonition to "keep awake" that accompanies the apocalyptic vision recounted in Mark 13 enjoins the same attentiveness to God's agenda. Here, however, as is often the case in apocalyptic literature, the hearer is invited to consider what it means to participate in the work of God, even when the events of the moment overwhelm us (Mk 13:33).²⁰ Mark, then, is doing his own theocentric thinking here. As Eugene Boring observes,

The future apocalyptic kingdom of Mark is not an utterly new discontinuity with the life of Jesus and the life of the church. For Mark...the word of the kingdom was planted by Jesus and continues to be planted by preachers and teachers. And when the apocalyptic kingdom comes, it will not be utterly discontinuous with all that has been, but will maintain continuity with what is already mysteriously, paradoxically present in Jesus and his disciples. But it will not simply grow out of their work; the Son of Man will come from the transcendent world to bring it to consummation.²¹

Advent Two: Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

There will always be people who are surprised by the emphasis on repentance in the Advent lections, in part because we do so little education around the spiritual disciplines implicit in the liturgical calendar. The surprise can also be traced to the ways in which the secular celebration of Christmas has reduced Advent to little more than shopping and family festivities. Navigating the lections is also complicated by the implicit, cultural assumption that repentance is tantamount to shaming, an effort by the church, if not by God, that is bent on making the penitents feel badly about themselves. (Although, ironically, we have no difficulty in affirming its place in twelve-step programs and similar efforts.²²)

The second week of lections gives the opportunity to help people understand that a theocentric reading of the Advent texts is not just about focusing on the larger work of God; it is also about acknowledging the obstacles to welcoming God's coming. This is the point of repentance, and it is worth noting that in the reading from Isaiah 40, that is why words of comfort and images of a God who "will gather the lambs in

his arms” appears hard on the heels of a nation that has paid her penalty. Preachers will want to look for images that communicate this insight and subvert the distractions that our cultural lenses have introduced, like that found in the work of Archimandrite George Capsanis who writes, “Repentance is...a dynamic condition, a continuous progress towards the Lord. Properly speaking, it is the pursuit of the living God. Its character is neither primarily ethical or legalistic. Instead, it is the fruit of a sanctified eroticism which strains toward the beloved Lord, a sign of profound humility and desire for God.”²³

One may also rely on Mark’s gospel and the description of John the Baptist’s ministry to communicate some of the same truths. Here, however, the text invites us to consider how repentance and a positive response to John’s preaching contributes to making the Lord’s paths straight. Mark’s gospel also invites us to consider the ways in which we—clergy and lay people alike—share the same space before God. The theocentric approach to the text reminds us that the spiritual discipline of repentance is not something we demand of one another or that the church as an institution exacts of those around it. Repentance is, for all of us, the process of letting go of those things which make it impossible for us to receive what God longs to give us.

Advent Three: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Having talked about the work of God and the repentance that makes it possible for us to receive the gifts of God, the third week of Advent offers space to turn our attention to the purpose of our lives and the question identified earlier in the article: How can we be available to the work of God?

Whether one focuses on the words of Isaiah 61, which find expression in the ministry of Jesus (Luke 4:18-19) or the example of John the Baptist in the reading from John’s Gospel, both texts give the preacher an opportunity to subvert the all too common narrative that God’s purpose is to solve our problems. Although good news is announced to the oppressed and captives are set free, significantly, the coming of God’s kingdom derives both its shape and its inspiration from God’s love of justice and righteousness, the definition of which can only be found in the ordering that comes with God’s reign. The House of Israel and those who hear John are called to cooperate with this vision. As Walter Brueggemann observes in Isaiah 61, “The variation of speakers (human speaker—Yahweh—human speaker) indicates how intimately connected are Yahwistic resolve and human vocation.”²⁴

There are many ways to prompt a congregation to consider how they might cooperate with God’s “resolve.” One of the best ways, perhaps, to invite people to contemplate this calling is to describe the inspiration that shaped the spiritual exercises outlined by Ignatius of Loyola. Mapped out across four weeks of praying with the Gospel stories, Ignatius invited his followers to first pray for the forgiveness of their sins and then to journey imaginatively with Jesus through his ministry, his passion and death, and finally his resurrection. The point of this prayerful journey was not to address the personal and spiritual challenges they faced—although the Exercises often did—but to teach them how to be available to the purposes of God. The order came to be known as “The Companions of Jesus” and this, not the title “Jesuit,” is the one that they still prefer.²⁵

Advent Four: 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:26-38

The fourth and final week of Advent centers on a text from 2 Samuel 7 and the covenant made by God with David. David's throne is, in turn, the throne of Christ, according to the reading from Luke's Gospel.

This last set of texts gives the preacher an opportunity to think about the larger, redemptive task of God against the backdrop of what is to come, giving the congregation not just an understanding of Advent, but of the liturgical year and the saving acts of God in Christ: the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. Describing that work as "apostolic preaching," Irenaeus writes:

Hither were the prophets sent by God through the Holy Spirit; and they instructed the people and turned them to the God of their fathers, the Almighty; and they became heralds of the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God, declaring that from the posterity of David His flesh should blossom forth; that after the flesh He might be the son of David, who was the son of Abraham by a long succession; but according to the spirit Son of God, pre-existing with the Father, begotten before all the creation of the world, and at the end of the times appearing to all the world as man, the Word of God gathering up in Himself all things that are in heaven and that are on earth.²⁶

Here and elsewhere, Irenaeus offers a commanding and comprehensive picture of God's redemptive work as "recapitulation," arguing that with the first Advent, Jesus brings divinity into creation and that through Jesus's death, resurrection, and ascension, he also takes redeemed humanity back into the life of God.²⁷

By working through this theme, the preacher once again has the opportunity to explore the question "What is God doing?" and can rely on the lenses provided by the liturgical year and the church's understanding of the work of Christ as above or by working exclusively with one of the texts.²⁸

As Walter Brueggemann notes, in Second Samuel, the answer to the question "What is God doing?" is fleshed out in the contrast drawn between David's dynastic designs and the will of God. David plans to build a temple, as all kings do, but God will not be co-opted. "David will not build Yahweh a house (temple), but Yahweh will build David a house (dynasty)."²⁹ And that divine initiative will not just govern the foreseeable future, but will become the vehicle for God's redemptive purposes: "I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more... (2 Sa 7:10a)."

God is not trapped by moments in history or by our schemes for control. Exercising sovereignty that we cannot understand and do not master even in our freedom to act, God declares, "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever (7:16)." The passage should not be interpreted as a promise from God to do our bidding, but as a window into a story that is not finally about us, but about God.

By contrast, Luke's Gospel offers us a different picture. If David, acting as all monarchs do, believes himself to be sovereign, but becomes the servant of God's purposes, Mary readily and courageously says "yes" to the purposes of God (Lk 1:38). It is little wonder that, contrary to what seems possible in the moment, she becomes

the God-bearer and the first apostle.

Conclusion

Will the approach that I've outlined above speak to the anxiety that we experience this Advent or the choices that we may face both personally and publicly? It will depend in part on how the preacher unpacks these themes. Conversations about the will and work of God are always fraught with errors born of quietism on one end of the spectrum and demagoguery on the other. But if we hope to speak a word of hope and challenge in this Advent season, it is important to remember this: God's redemptive work embraces our lives, but it is not about our needs. It embraces our world, but it is not about our politics. Our hope, then, lies in God's agenda, not our own. That was the case over 2000 years ago on the uneven roads of Galilee. Things are no different today.

Notes

1 Alongside considerable doctrinal controversy, active Roman persecution of the church stretched in fits and starts from A.D. 64 to 313, when the Edict of Milan brought that particular brand of persecution to a "definitive" end. (See: Ivo Lesbaupin, *Blessed are the Persecuted, Christian Life in the Roman Empire, A.D. 64-313*, trans., Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987), ix.) That period was not marked by uniform tensions, and it would be a mistake to imagine that the coliseum was choked with Christians for almost 250 years. But even though John the Elder probably wrote to the churches in Asia Minor during a time marked by rather more subtle social pressures and discrimination, his language makes the peril of his day and age clear. *Ibid.*, 1-2. See also: Frederick W. Schmidt, *Conversations with Scripture: Revelation* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 2005), 37ff.

2 The number of books and articles on fear and anxiety is on the rise. It is not good news that the partisanship that marks public discourse also tends to shape the literature on the subject. What we are left with, in other words, from the people who might help us process our fears is, instead, the message: "My fears are legitimate. Yours are not." See, for example, from both sides of the political ledger: Molly Ball, "Donald Trump and the Politics of Fear," *The Atlantic* (September 2, 2016): <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/09/donald-trump-and-the-politics-of-fear/498116/>; Neil Strauss, "Why We're Living in the Age of Fear," *Rolling Stone* (October 6, 2016): <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/features/why-were-living-in-the-age-of-fear-w443554>; Omer Karasapan, "Refugees, migrants, and the politics of fear," *Brookings* (April 12, 2017): <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2017/04/12/refugees-migrants-and-the-politics-of-fear/>; David R. Henderson and John H. Cochrane, "Climate Change Isn't the End of the World," *The Wall Street Journal* (July 30, 2017): <https://www.wsj.com/articles/climate-change-isnt-the-end-of-the-world-1501446277>. For a survey of fear in America, see: "America's Top Fears 2016," <https://blogs.chapman.edu/wilkinson/2016/10/11/americas-top-fears-2016/>.

3 Erskine Clark, "Foreword," *Journal for Preachers* XXXVII.1 (Advent, 2013): 1.

4 Bendroth, Margaret, "Christian Fundamentalism in America," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, 4 Aug. 2017. <http://religion.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-419>.

5 *Ibid.* Protestant liberalism had earlier origins, of course, but the aftermath of World War I brought liberals and fundamentalists into sharper conflict. Dietrich Bonhoeffer witnessed to the polarizing effect of that same debate when he visited Union Theological Seminary in 1930 and 31. See: Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 101ff. Cf. Matthew S. Hedstrom, *The Rise of Liberal Religion: Book Culture and American Spirituality in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 23ff.

6 S. Fillmore Bennett(w.) and J.P. Webster (m.), "The Sweet By And By" (Chicago: Lyon & Healy, 1868).

7 See: Stanley M. Hauerwas, "Bonhoeffer on Truth and Politics," Conference on Lived Theology and Civil Courage, University of Virginia, June 14, 2003: 3 and 5 n. 11. For a link to the text of his lecture, see: <http://livedtheology.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/hauerwas.pdf>.

8 Libby Sternberg, “Why not a day of rest from politics?” *The Wall Street Journal* (July 27, 2017): https://www.wsj.com/article_email/why-not-a-day-of-rest-from-politics-1501193333-lMyQjAxMTA3NzAwNDgwMzQ2Wj/

9 An interesting effort to thread the historical and theological tensions between evangelicalism and fundamentalism is Rhynne R. Putnam’s *In Defense of Doctrine: Evangelicalism, Theology, and Scripture* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015): 2ff.

10 Those alternatives continue to be defining—shaping sermons, theological and civic debates, and even the professional lives of the participants. See, for example, on the progressive side of the ledger: David P. Gushee, *Still Christian: Following Jesus Out of American Evangelicalism*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017); Hal Taussig, *A New Spiritual Home: Progressive Christianity at the Grass Roots* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2006), 2, 111, 138, 168. On the other side of the ledger, though not always under the label, “fundamentalist,” see: Putnam, *In Defense of Doctrine*, 393ff. Roman Catholics have been drawn into the fray as well: E.g., Dwight Longenecker, “12 Reasons Why Progressive Protestantism Will Die Out,” Patheos.com, June 19, 2016: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/standingonmyhead/2016/01/twelve-reasons-why-progressive-christianity-will-die-out.html>. For a historian’s insight into the past, present, and probable future, see: George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006): *passim*. But note in particular his conclusion: p. 257.

11 The same shift from a theocentric to an anthropocentric focus mars our approach to prayers of discernment. The decisive question in such prayers is the question, “What is God doing in the world?” Our tendency is to ask, “What does God want me to do?” The latter is not an inappropriate question, but there is no way to answer that question in a reliable fashion without first asking, “Where and how is God at work in the world?” See: Frederick W. Schmidt, *What God Wants for Your Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 1ff. and 129ff.

12 See: William Kurz, “Patristic Interpretation of Scripture within God’s Story of Creation and Redemption,” *Letter & Spirit in The Bible and the Church Fathers: The Liturgical Context of Patristic Exegesis*, vol. 7, eds., Owen M. Phelan and Stephen D. Ryan (Steubenville: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2011), 35.

13 All four events anchor the narrative of both the Apostles’ and the Nicene creeds. As William Kurz observes, the creeds have a different historical role, but like “the rule of faith” (described above), they make a similar contribution to the life of the church and to the reading of Scripture (*Ibid.*, 43). Citing the role that both played in patristic exegesis, he observes, “Early Christian Fathers regularly read and steeped themselves in Scripture and participated in liturgies that featured biblical readings over the course of the Church’s liturgical year (readings which together commemorate most of God’s story of salvation). They expressed their personal and communal prayers in the words of the Old Testament psalms, and they consciously lived with in the biblical worldview. They understood themselves as created by God, as sinners with Adam and his descendants, as reconciled to God by the death and resurrection of Jesus, God’s Son. Through the Church’s liturgical year, they placed themselves with in the biblical events as participants in them.” See: *Ibid.*, 40-1. This approach need not and should not replace sound historical critical work with the text, but exegetical work guided by “the rule of faith” enriches the task and the results.

14 Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, Westminster Bible Companion, Patrick D. Miller and David L. Bartlett, eds. (Louisville: John Knox Westminster Press, 1998), 6.

15 For another, compatible description of the Christian narrative, see: David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite, The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 324ff.

16 Given the focus of this article, I have chosen to omit comments on the Psalms and the readings from the Epistles. A general observation that I cannot resist making here is that one of my regular frustrations with the *Revised Common Lectionary* is the way in which the passages from the epistles have been edited. Far too often, there is no shred of context left and the *RCL* regularly draws from the opening formula or the closing benediction. This happens again during Advent in Year B. The only options that the preacher has are either (1) to use a different reading or (2) supply the larger context.

17 On the turmoil that governed Israel’s life at the time of Isaiah’s writing, see: Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 1-2.

18 *Ibid.*, 233-4.

19 As Heschel puts it, God’s passion is the prophet’s passion. “It moves him. It breaks out in him like a

storm in the soul, overwhelming his inner life, his thoughts, feelings, wishes, and hopes....The unique feature of [his] religious sympathy is not self-conquest, but self dedication; not the suppression of emotion, but its redirection; not silent subordination, but active co-operation with God; not love which aspires to the Being of God in Himself, but harmony of the soul with the concern of God." Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 308-309.

20 For Mark, those events were part of the turmoil that the church faced somewhere between 60 and 80CE. See: M. Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library, C. Clifton Black and John T. Carroll, eds. (Louisville: John Knox Westminster, 2006), 14-15.

21 *Ibid.*, 357-8.

22 Julia Gatta and Martin L. Smith, *Go in Peace, The Art of Hearing Confessions* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2012), 3-4.

23 George Caplanis, *The Eros of Repentance, Praxis Pocketbooks 1*, trans., Alexander Golitzin (Newbury: Praxis Institute Press, no date), 17.

24 Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 212.

25 See, for example, Joseph A. Tetlow, *Ignatius Loyola, Spiritual Exercises*, The Crossroad Spiritual Legacy Series, John Farina, ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 89ff.

26 St. Irenaeus of Lyon, *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, Armitage Robinson, ed. (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1920), Para. 29, 48.

27 Or as Douglas Farrow puts it: "If [Jesus] descends as God to man so that man may ascend to God, he also descends as man so that alienated man may not fail to ascend with him...." See: Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 57.

28 Preachers rarely craft a successful sermon around more than one lection. Both the demands of interpreting a text and increasing biblical illiteracy make it necessary to focus on a single text.

29 Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, James Luther Mays, Patrick D. Miller, Jr., and Paul J. Achtemeier, eds. (Louisville: John Knox Westminster, 1990), 255.