

Preaching the Advent Texts

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I start from the assumption that all preaching, like all theology and all biblical interpretation, is both textual and contextual. Every time we open the Bible, in a stance of expectant listening for the Word of God speaking to us from within it, we should not be surprised to find that the Bible had changed. It is almost as if God had rolled out a new set of Advent lessons for the Church, custom made for our present circumstance. We will see things and hear things we had never noticed before. Of course, they were always there, ready and waiting for us to find them, but we weren't ready to receive them yet, so they were invisible and inaudible to us, as if they weren't there before. Now, when we so desperately need them, they shine bright and clear, like icicles in the moonlight; they sound forth like a full symphony orchestra. In order to understand better the interaction of text and context that makes these old words so new for us, we preachers might adopt a fourfold strategy of reading: reading the season; reading the situation; reading the people; and reading the biblical texts.

Reading the Season

What has changed? Isn't Advent always the same with its emphasis on the Coming of Jesus Christ? The Latin word *Adventus* means arrival or coming. In Advent, we prepare our hearts for the mystery of the incarnation (or *enfleshment*) of the Word, the Son of God become human, God with us, one of us and yet not exactly one with us, because fully God as well as fully human. The Church has traditionally taught that we wait for the Advent of Christ, not in a passive way (as if we were killing time waiting in a long line for it to finally be our turn for something) but in an active, expectant, hopeful stance (on tiptoe, curious, eager, watchful, as if expecting a friend or loved one to enter the door at any moment). During the four weeks of Advent which precede the feast of Christmas, the celebration of the incarnation, the Church waits expectantly in three different ways, or, better, for three different aspects of the coming of Christ: in history, in mystery, and in majesty. The lessons chosen for Advent reinforce this threefold coming: we look to the past, to the history of Jesus of Nazareth who was sent by God and came to dwell with us and to redeem us; we look to the present, to those mystical times when we are encountered by the risen Christ in moments of prayer, in the power of the preached word, in the sacraments of the Church; and we look to the future, when Jesus Christ will return in majesty to judge the living and the dead, as confessed in the ecumenical creeds of the churches.

All of this is standard doctrine or church teaching about Advent, so why does it feel so different this year? Perhaps we need to focus more precisely on the quality of our waiting and the several kinds of preparation to which God may be calling church members this Advent.

Reading the Situation

A friend and I were trading ideas about words or phrases that should be banned, at least temporarily, from all public speech. You already know them: "This has been

a year like no other,” “unprecedented,” “of course, that was before COVID,” “then COVID made that impossible,” etc. We were hardly serious: people need to be able to talk about the way it was before the COVID pandemic and how different our lives are at present, and how we can’t wait until this situation changes, and what we think the odds are about how soon this could or could not happen. Yet we might notice that even our language is tired!

The truth that is slowly dawning on us is that we have no idea how long this pandemic is going to last, how many more variants there might be and how dangerous and how contagious they could be, how long our politically divided nation will interpret almost everything in a hyper-politicized way, how the health policies and medical possibilities of nations around the world will affect their lives and ours, and many other things that are highly relevant to our present situation and our well-being about which we have no idea. If knowledge is power, our inability to know things that affect us directly and personally is a form of powerlessness. Moreover, as we keep hearing, the COVID pandemic has exposed and magnified the fault lines of injustice, especially racial injustice, that many in our nation have spent considerable time and energy hiding from ourselves, so that it would not be necessary to change them. Apparently, there are things we really want to know and things we really don’t want to know.

In August a year ago, I wrote for the *Journal for Preachers* an article about preaching in Advent 2020, in which, with no special gifts for telling the future, I predicted some things that I thought would be self-evident: the COVID virus still going strong, travel somewhat safer and also making things harder, school systems struggling to keep up with the latest infection and death numbers and to make decisions, constant change on all fronts trying to second guess the results of the pandemic, unemployment and loss of housing, especially for tenants, more “natural” disasters, increased tension about race and racial injustice, a deeply-divided nation, and emotional exhaustion. Unfortunately, I would have to venture the same predictions this year for Advent—with the addition of long obituary sections in the newspapers and many families facing Thanksgiving and Christmas this year with an empty chair at the table where a loved one had been only a year ago. The fatigue level is even higher now, because, for a while, the statistical numbers seemed to be improving and people became hopeful that we were nearing the end of this long ordeal; federal guidelines became more liberal; but now the numbers changed again and Sisyphus-like, we are starting over, having lost so much ground and so many lives.

Reading the People

Not surprisingly, the people of God, like most of the rest of the world, are struggling with the length and breadth and depth of this pandemic. Some of us, with tendencies towards addiction or depression are struggling even more. Parents and teachers are feeling an additional weight trying to protect the next generations and sometimes not realizing their own needs for self-care to avoid burn-out. Community leaders become targets for pent-up frustration. Hospital systems (doctors, nurses, first responders, cleaners) are not only losing staff to the pandemic and so working short-staffed, but they are also staring at death and dying people so much that they should probably be cycled out for more restful positions. But replacements are lacking, so they go on. Increased stress probably leads to more road and home accidents, so firefighters and

police are also stretched thin. I'm seeing more road rage and more anger in general, which means that people are afraid and stressed and unable to cope with their situations, but that means that everyone else's stress increases, too. It is hard right now. The world can feel too hard to go on. All the signs that it has felt like that (suicides, homicides, violent crimes) witness to the hopelessness that many people are feeling. The preacher needs to touch these wounds lightly and carefully, but never talking about them at all would not be a good strategy for pastoral care.

There are also incredible bursts of creativity, generosity, and a sense of wonder at the beauty of the created world that are not only helping people to survive, but also filling them with joy, even in the midst of great difficulties and complex challenges. Artists and performers are finding ways to use technology to overcome the difficulties of gathering safely. Musicians, dancers, actors, painters have all found ways to inspire the rest of us. Generous giving is not just the result of an improving stock market: people of all income levels are finding ways to help one another, to rescue animals, to plant trees and gardens. Not being able to travel has apparently released a lot of unused energy that has gone into writing, singing, composing, and dreaming of new and wonderful projects for the common good. There is a great deal of human resilience and resistance that refuses to give up hope and dares to try something never before imagined. There is much to celebrate here, and preachers have the power of naming: naming both the realities that are making life hard and also naming strategies for overcoming those realities in places where it seemed impossible. Every time one of these stories of resistance and resilience is told, it may move some other person to bold dreams and courageous action. This is not quite "the power of positive thinking" of an earlier generation, but it is a witness to the power of blessing what is good and true and beautiful. Whatever is praised from the pulpit is remembered, appreciated, and often imitated.

Reading the Biblical Texts

I suggested above that the traditional language of Advent about waiting for the Coming of Jesus Christ and preparing the way for that arrival in our hearts and minds might have special power this year—as counter-intuitive as that is in our situation of waiting for this pandemic to be over, or at least managed, and feeling like we have already prepared and prepared and prepared during the time we couldn't act! Moreover, I began this essay with the assumption that the "same old biblical texts" might contain some treasures not discernible to our old eyes and ears. As we mature in our faith, we tend to ask deeper theological questions than we did as children. I would argue that the people of God have grown in the last year or so: partly because we have had more time to think and pray than we have in times past and partly because we have been besieged with questions to think and pray about.

As always, God is there before us, anticipating our questions and welcoming them. This is the God who loves to listen to the desires of our hearts, who instructs us to ask, seek, knock, and promises to meet us in the scriptures. As Martin Luther put it, it is as if God were saying to us "If you want to find me, you know where to look: I will be present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist and in the waters of Baptism; and you will hear my voice speaking to you through the words of the Bible lessons for the day." One of the privileges of preparing a sermon is that the congregation has deputized us (and trusted us) to explore the lessons for the day, searching for the

Word of God in the words of the biblical texts. Part of the excitement of the preacher is like the child who has gone searching for treasure on the beach and returns running to the rest of the family, saying “Look what I found! Isn’t this wonderful?” At once, the discarded shell, long ignored, is seen to contain rainbow colors or a tiny creature inside.

The First Sunday of Advent: “Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus” (a hymn by Charles Wesley)

All three aspects of the Coming of Jesus Christ are present in the lessons for First Advent, the beginning of the Christian new year. Like our Jewish brothers and sisters, Christians begin the new year in a sober, reflective fashion, not like the ancient Roman Kalends (from which we get the word *calendar*) which involved way too much drinking. The Collect of the Day notes that “Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility” and “shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead” and prays for present “grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light” (Romans 13:12). What kind of preparation for Christ’s coming is implied in the concept of putting on an armor of light? What kind of protection is that? In 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13, Paul prays that God will “strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless... at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.” It is clear from these words that the waiting which Paul has in mind is an active heart housecleaning, so that the saints on earth are fit to entertain the saints who have gone before. Jeremiah 33:14-16 speaks of the attributes of the One who is coming: justice and righteousness. Psalm 25:7 echoes that idea: “Gracious and upright is the Lord,” and verse 9 suggests another kind of preparation: “the paths of the Lord are love and faithfulness.”

The Gospel for First Advent focuses primarily on the Return or Second Coming of Jesus Christ. The preacher may well want to linger here because there is often great confusion about how literally to understand apocalyptic language which is a kind of poetry. Luke 21:25ff speaks of signs in the sun, moon, and stars, the roaring of the sea, the powers of heaven being shaken, and people fainting from fear. Language taken from Daniel 7:14 describes “the Son of man coming in a cloud” which is not a cause for fear but a cause for rejoicing, “because your redemption is drawing near.” Some people in the ancient world thought that the end times would be like a woman giving birth (apocalyptic birth pangs) as the new order of God’s righteousness was born. The time of labor would come upon people suddenly and unexpectedly, as labor pains sometimes do. So Luke’s Jesus warns his disciples to “be alert at all times” and to “be on guard that your hearts are not weighed down.” What could weigh our hearts down? Dissipation and drunkenness, to be sure, but “the worries of this life” as well. The quality of our waiting for the Coming of Jesus Christ is at issue here: we are expecting redemption, so we are invited to be light of heart as we wait for God’s justice in the return of Christ.

The Second Sunday of Advent: “Born to Set Thy People Free” (Charles Wesley)

The next three Sundays all deal with John the Baptizer, especially the next two. In the Orthodox tradition, John is called “the Forerunner” (in the ancient world, the person who ran ahead of the king and warned the people to get ready to receive him). The Collect describes God as merciful: “You sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way of our salvation.” Malachi 3:1-4 gives us the

words Malachi heard from God: “I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me.” Then God describes God’s own coming: “The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.” That would seem to be wonderful news until the question God asks: “But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?” (God will be like the refiner’s fire that burns away impurities from gold and silver so that they are pure.)

The father of John the Baptizer is Zechariah, and his song (Luke 1:68-79) directly addresses his infant son, the cousin of Jesus, born just months before him: “You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way.” That way, the way of the Lord Jesus, is a way of freedom: “the forgiveness of sins” in the dawning light of God’s compassion “to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death” (Could any biblical text be more relevant than that one?) and “to guide our feet into the way of peace.” What powerful language of salvation and redemption!

All of this prepares *our* way for the Gospel (Luke 3:1-6) where the adult John is introduced in the words of Isaiah 40. John is “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” John will baptize Jesus in the Jordan River, and when John is shut up in Herod’s prison, Jesus will carry on his ministry of preaching repentance from sin and will add to that the ministry of setting people free from Satan’s power. Before all that is said, we see a close up shot of Luke’s care as a historian to locate John both in secular history (the Roman emperor Tiberius; the governor of Judea Pontius Pilate; three sons of Herod the Great: Antipas, Philip, and Lysanias) and also in Temple history: the high priests Annas and Caiaphas. *That* was when the word of God came to John in the wilderness.

The Third Sunday of Advent: “From Our Fears and Sins Release Us” (Charles Wesley)

The Collect prays that God will come among us with great power: “Because we are sorely hindered by our sins,”...“speedily help and deliver us.” Deliverance is the theme that runs through Zephaniah 3:14-20 as well. “The Lord has taken away the judgments against you.” “The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.” Instead, God “will rejoice over you with gladness” and “will renew you in his love.” Paul, writing to the Philippians (4:4-7) invites them (and by implication us) to “Rejoice in the Lord always.” He explains, “The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer ... let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Once again, we are prompted to think about how we wait and how we prepare for the Coming of Christ in Advent.

The Gospel lesson almost takes us there, as we hear what John the Baptizer says about himself and about the coming of Jesus: “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” The prophecy of John is fulfilled in Luke’s second book, the Acts of the Apostles, when, at Pentecost, Jesus pours out the Holy Spirit upon the Church in tongues of fire, from his place at the right hand of God.

The first part of the Gospel shows John at his fiercest: “Bear fruits worthy of repentance.”... “Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” But when the

crowds ask him what they should do to prepare (and we listen in eagerly), he gives them practical advice about sharing possessions and food with the needy and warns about greed, corruption, extortion, and coveting. This is practical ethical advice. John shows us the way to justice and to equity.

The Fourth Sunday of Advent: “Let Us Find Our Rest in Thee” (Charles Wesley)

The last Sunday focuses on our daily life and on the present action of God more than on what we need to do to prepare for the Coming of Jesus Christ. The Collect reflects the shift: “Purify our conscience”... “by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself.” The word *mansion* in our day may produce thoughts of a huge house (megamansion), but it used to mean only a place to rest. Our hunch that size is not the issue here is confirmed by the prophet Micah (5:2) who hears God speak to the town of Bethlehem: “You, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.” The One who is to come “will feed his flock... and they live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the One of peace.” Psalm 80 picks up the theme of God as the Shepherd of Israel, and the refrain (v.3 and v.7) prays: “Restore us, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.” Hebrews 10:5-10 hints at the purpose of the incarnation by quoting Psalm 40: God prepared a body for the Son, so that he would be both priest and sacrifice, perfectly fulfilling the will of God and effecting our sanctification.

But the preacher will probably head for the Gospel lesson which recounts the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth (and John the Baptizer jumping for joy in her womb). Mary takes the initiative, travels to the hill country, enters the house of Zechariah, and greets Elizabeth. At the sound of her voice, unborn John reacts, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, says the first “hail, Mary.” Mary’s response is the famous *Magnificat* in which she praises God for mercy and justice for the poor and powerless. Mary is herself pregnant with Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. One of the wonderful things about Luke’s Gospel is the beginning of his account of the annunciation to Mary by the angel Gabriel which happens “in the sixth month” (1:26). The sixth month of what? Why, of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, of course!