

Preaching Images for the Advent Season

Peter W. Marty

St. Paul Lutheran Church, Davenport, Iowa

The lectionary readings for Advent are well known to preachers who have been in the pulpit more than a few Decembers. So what does one do with them? We could *illustrate* their narrative power. But illustrations have their limits. Too often, we treat them as indispensable elements of fine preaching. If illustrations contribute to preaching at all, they mostly offer scraps of visual prose.

Images and metaphors, on the other hand, help inspire poetry in a sermon. Images encourage a preacher's heart to flirt nimbly with deep ideas. Metaphors demand that hearers flex their imagination. Images and metaphors discourage stale thinking. If you have preached these Advent texts one too many times, and fresh eyes are hard to come by, perhaps a few images and metaphors can stir your heart and get your pen moving.

Advent 1 (a)

Isaiah 64: 1-9

A 56-year-old woman I know brought her husband home after six months in a rehabilitation center. A nasty car accident and multiple surgeries did a number on his brain and wreaked havoc with his mobility. He wasn't the same person his friends knew him to be. The twinkle in his eye was gone. And although he returned to the familiar territory of the home he built years earlier, this man and his wife faced a host of unfamiliar challenges. On many days, those challenges descended into crises of despair.

The first word out of each of their mouths, spoken on the occasion of nearly every crisis, was, "Where?" As in, "Where are we going to go with all these difficulties that are pulling us down?" Somewhat plaintively they found themselves asking, "Where is our hope?"

A similar longing was on the lips of the Hebrew people trying to find their way around Jerusalem after 70 years in exile. They were lost in what was supposed to be the excitement of being back home. "Where is the fence my grandfather built to encircle our vineyard?" "Where on earth did our neighborhood go?" "Where is the temple?" The biggest question they couldn't help but raise time and time again was, "Where are you, God?"

That just so happens to be what the brain-injured man and his wife kept asking too. "Where are you, God?" The expectations for some return to normalcy that the couple was hoping for, and the lavish promises that the people of Israel had heard would be in place, were not materializing.

God seemed anything but present and available to these ones in crisis. The prophet doesn't actually use the word *where* in his sixty-fourth chapter. It may be too weak of a lead-in for the depth of anguish at hand, or too prayerful a tone for the heartache inside the returning refugees. Instead, he draws on the desperation of people who want God to quit hiding behind the membrane that separates heaven and earth. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down," he cries. One can feel the Israelites

clawing at that skin themselves, if only they could reach its imaginary height.

The Hebrew people suspect their sinful ways are at the root of God's decision to hide and be angry. They don't like their sin any more than they appreciate God's anger. So, they confess the former and plead for leniency on the latter. In the end, it is the humble acknowledgement of their relationship with the Lord that offers the best perspective to their frustrating wait. "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand."

Mark 13: 24-37

The Homeland Security color-coded terrorism threat scale is now a relic of the past. It was a nervous little blip on the screen of American history, prompted by leftover anxieties from 9/11. On a spectrum scale of five colors, green at the bottom indicated a low risk of terrorist attacks, and red at the top warned of a severe risk.

The system was doomed to be short-lived. Air travelers traipsing through airports quickly realized the warning was apt to be forever orange. No self-respecting homeland security official would dare lower the threat level to yellow, lest a medium risk signal suggest complacency. Yet the "severe risk" red level, if left in place, would only encourage dismissiveness in travelers' minds. Nobody can stay perpetually ready on high alert forever. So orange, or "high risk," became the permanent default.

In the Christian community, we are not exactly dismissive of Jesus. But few observers would accuse believers today of living on high alert. If anything, we are prone to flattening out our world, opting mostly for secularized habits and behaviors. On many days, we expect little in the world to change. The idea of Jesus returning to play a visible role in our lives inspires few. A seismograph wired to our psyche would be lucky to detect even the slightest tremor of anticipation.

Seeing our weak attention or indifference to his eventual return, Jesus tells a simple story of some servants whose master left them in charge of his house. It may be Jesus' uncomplicated way of saying, "Don't go to sleep on me," a plea for vigilance that sounds an awful lot like the appeal he made to his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane.

We shouldn't miss Jesus' rejection of our calendarizing instincts. Since he is not in on God the Father's secret about the timing of when the kingdom will come – "About that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" – how strange that so many Christians are supremely confident they know.

When will the master of the house come home? No one knows. In the evening?—that's when a disciple betrays. At midnight?—that's when a neighbor goes knocking for bread. At cockcrow?—that's when Peter denies. At dawn?—that's when some women find the tomb empty. Any time is plausible.

Jesus pulls a play out of the apocalyptic playbook and talks of cataclysmic events. Solar and lunar eclipses, falling stars, and booming thunder all may be in the forecast. The preacher might remember the meaning of *apocalypse* in Greek—to remove or tear away a veil. One can play with this veil idea homiletically. Whether the veil is made of clouds (v. 26) or something more immediate to our lives that fogs up our vision, the Lord is coming. There is no stopping this return.

Advent 2 (a)

2 Peter 3: 8-15a

Imagine watching an ugly film clip of your house being consumed by fire. Some dreaded Santa Ana winds roar up the canyon one sunny day, and everything that means coziness to you is gone. In a matter of minutes, nothing is left. The roof shingles turn to goo. The siding melts. The walls dissolve into ash.

Losing the house is one thing; knowing that everything you cherish inside your dwelling has been destroyed is quite another. Gone is your childhood scrapbook, your grandmother's jewelry, your retirement savings, your favorite chair, your computer—well, everything.

With all these precious things eviscerated, what would your life look like? What would the contours of meaning be for you now? Would there still be a “you” worth getting to know? These are not superfluous questions. They are significant ones informing the writing of Second Peter. The author's eyes see the image of a fiery meltdown in the end times.

We know that biblical writers possessed a vivid imagination whenever end times were their subject matter. In the case of Second Peter, where scoffers in the community were treating the idea of the Lord's return as a joke, the imaginative fires of the writer only burned hotter. What could he say of value to skeptics who didn't even believe in the Lord's return and who used their cynicism to justify loose living (3:3)?

In our appointed selection from chapter three, the writer addresses more receptive believers. These ones were willing to give him a hearing. He posed a question to them that remains relevant for listeners in our day: “What sort of persons do you want to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, as you wait for the coming of the day of God?” Or, in alternative wording, “If you were stripped of everything, and if everything you thought mattered in your life suddenly disappeared, what kind of person would you be?”

Everybody in on this reading gets to reflect on his or her relationship with God. A moral examination of personal goodness doesn't have to organize the reflection. We are called to be holy long before we were called to be good. So, perhaps a study of particular ways our lives get dedicated to God, or set apart for a specific purpose, will offer the best value for preaching.

Mark 1:1-8

According to church tradition, John the Baptist is the patron saint of bird dealers, hailstorms, spasms, tailors, convulsions, the Knights of Malta, epileptics, and Dodge City, Kansas. What any of these things have in common, or why they would be attached to John's ministry in the wilderness, is not clear, though a city dweller visiting Dodge City might consider that town to be the definition of wilderness. The list is mostly a sign of our confusion over what to make of John. We toss out oddities and tape them to the back of John's camel hair jacket.

He was a wild man by anyone's reckoning—phony-free perhaps, but also not likely to make the invite list for your daughter's wedding. His wardrobe, not to mention his locust breath, was an instant turn-off to all but the most serious seekers. Despite his coarse appearance and his distance from any city center, people kept taking the time to go out and hear him. They flocked to him in great numbers, sitting at his feet and listening to what he had to say. The biblical writers find his eccentric manner note-

worthy. But so far as we can tell, those who were eager for a Messiah didn't give his oddities a second thought. They simply figured that John was the guy you had to go through if you were to get to Jesus. Like a stream that hikers must ford to reach the other side, with no logs or stepping-stones to help, John was the stream. His words were as clear as the water with which he baptized.

He spoke with frankness about repentance, insisting that people turn from the wrong way to a better way. It was the sort of honesty that would instantly eliminate a political candidate in our day who speaks the truth a bit too plainly. But John was no candidate, and the people who stayed to hear him were open to a life different from the one they were living. They just needed some directional help for getting there.

When our firstborn was ready to come home from the hospital, I knew our house would be unfamiliar to him. So I raced home, blew up a few balloons, and taped a note to his bedroom door: "Jacob, this will be your room." That directional sign was an indication that this little guy had a permanent place in our home, even if we didn't have the foggiest idea what his presence yet meant for the contour of our lives.

The sixteenth-century painter Matthias Grunewald, in his famous Isenheim altarpiece, depicts John the Baptist as a directional guide. With his long, bony finger, John points at the crucified Jesus. Had Grunewald painted an Advent scene of John, he might well have had the wild man standing atop a rock, pointing emphatically at a little sign he has affixed to the torso region of his listeners' tunics. I can envision each sign, emblazoned with the same announcement, referencing the human heart inside those chests: "God, this will be your room."

Advent 3 (a)

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11

Since John the Baptist figures prominently again in the Gospel for this day, let's take a look at the other two principal readings, beginning with Isaiah.

"The Lord has anointed me ... to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners." Jesus chose these words of Isaiah to mark the opening of his ministry. It was an inaugural move he apparently made with great intentionality. No post-it note marked the passage for his eye to catch. He unrolled the synagogue scroll deliberately and "found the place," Luke tells us, where some ancient had inscribed the words. Jesus knew them, perhaps by heart. They became the purpose statement for his entire vocation. Not enough churches in America organize their whole ministry around people who get stepped on. Congregations get busy running programs and ensuring that money comes, such that they forget to do little more than talk about the downtrodden people who interested Jesus so much.

As one reads the first half of the appointed reading from Isaiah and compares it with the second half, the contrast between temporariness and permanence, or uncertainty and stability, is unmistakable. Isaiah describes the renewal that will take place in the lives of those who are pressed down by the weight of their circumstances. They will wear a "mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit." There may be a whole sermon in that one phrase.

If we were to walk in the tattered shoes of homeless persons in warm weather cities, where legislation to protect tourism rarely operates in their favor, we'd experience a taste of life on the run. How do you settle into a good night's sleep when

you are always watching your backside? “We’re so sleep-deprived, we’re running around,” said Bill Garcia, a 51-year-old man who has lived on the streets of Waikiki since coming from Los Angeles to search for a job. “We ask [authorities], ‘Where do you want us to go?’ and they just say, ‘Get out of Waikiki.’”¹

Isaiah knows that the Lord loves justice and hates robbery. This isn’t bank robbery at issue. People robbed of important assets like sleep and dignity will experience new stability with the coming of the Lord. New dwelling places, new wardrobes, new jewelry will be their compensation for enduring such a painful past. This is no prosperity gospel. It is simply a reference to bent-over people suddenly walking as tall as all others who have convinced themselves that their wealth and comfort are deserved, or that their distancing of the poor is justified.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Imagine your parishioners re-reading this passage on a Sunday afternoon in December, having heard it in church, but now trying to figure out their week ahead. What would their takeaway from Paul’s words be? Or from your sermon?

“Rejoice always.” Really? I have a joyous spirit, but not when I think of my brother who refuses to even try and land a job. “Pray without ceasing.” Only nut jobs turn everything into a prayer. Right? Am I supposed to pray while watching ESPN? “Give thanks in all circumstances.” I prefer to be a bit more selective in my gratitude. I am positively not thankful for the pancreatic cancer in my friend Ron. “Do not quench the Spirit.” What spirit? I don’t feel any zip these days; I’m depleted. “Test everything.” Even my brownies? I know that recipe backwards and forwards, thank you very much. “Hold fast to what is good.” I love it when our family laughs. It’s the best feeling. But what happens when it ends? “Abstain from every evil.” If I have to attend another Christmas cookie open house this month, I’m going to go crazy. I want to say no to all of our friends, but how? Their parties are not exactly evil.

So what do these little admonitions mean? Many preachers tend to like New Testament epistles where ethics for right living are laid out in clear fashion. It may be that lists of imperatives give the illusion that preaching is mostly about telling people what to do. When you have a checklist printed in scripture, you may believe your sermon preparation is half complete. Little interpretive work is needed. Not so.

If God is at the heart of every good sermon, each of Paul’s injunctions to the Thessalonians has the character of God wrapped within. Paul is not proposing courteous living according to certain do’s and don’ts. He is talking about Godly living where God is integral to the shape of our lives and decisions. Only God can make us holy. It is God who sanctifies both our spirits and our bodies. For those who are wide open, or even partially open, to exploring more holiness for their lives this Advent, the faithfulness of God stands at the ready. A preacher can help reveal different angles of what that holiness might look like.

Advent 4 (a)

1 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

At one time or another, every one of us draws certain comparisons between the house or apartment in which we live and the dwelling place of others. We reflect on not only what we have in the way of daily comfort, but we imagine what would be ours if we upgraded or downgraded. Whether we live in a palace or a hovel, whether

we feel self-conscious and embarrassed or disappointed and jealous, the practice of making mental comparisons between our residence and the homes of others is normal. It happens quietly in our heads.

So what would you conclude if you were to contemplate the appropriateness of your house in light of what God would choose for your earthly days? Or, what if you were to contrast your house with God's habitat, if it were even possible to conceive of an actual residence for the divine? This second question is what David wrestles with one day. Surrounded by his own luxurious lodgings, he wonders why the Lord has been relegated to a pup tent. He appears troubled that the Lord would have a dwelling place that is no more permanent than a portable Ark of the Covenant that gets moved all over the region.

Basking in his elaborate palace, David proposes an upgrade for God's residence. It's a tad presumptuous to think for God, but David wants to build the Lord a house. With a simple comeback, however, God reverses David's plan and promises to build *him* a royal house – a “dynasty.” New Testament readers later learn that the lineage of Jesus derived from this dynasty.²

Christians do not have an Ark of the Covenant to tow around. And there are limits to our popular metaphor suggesting that a church building equals the house of the Lord. But this Advent, it might be a good idea to explore ways in which we can move the presence of the Lord more fully inside our households. What new rituals or disciplines might we be open to giving a try? Think creatively here.

Since much of our spiritual development occurs outside the walls of church, this is a perfect day to stop and reflect, inside our cozy living spaces, what matters most to us about God. Sitting reflectively in such comfort may help us ask why so many of our daily decisions and behaviors disregard God. Basking in the temple of our own homes offers little excuse for us to feel self-satisfied. As God reminded David, his prosperity was due to God's caring attention. God remains the primary source of our provisions as well.

Luke 1:26-38

Artistic crèche designers do a fine job of depicting Mary in adorable fashion. She is the obedient one who, in the silence of her inanimate face, says yes to the angel Gabriel. “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” She does not speak as a statuette, of course. We have to imagine words on her lips. More difficult to see in a Mary crèche figurine is the anxiety she displays earlier in the story. When first informed of her unplanned pregnancy, her startled response is: “How can this be?” A sculptor would have to add serious contortion to her face to reflect this panic.

“How can this be?” I hear people utter such dismay all the time. They change the wording, but the meaning is the same. “I have no idea how I landed this job. I must just be lucky.” “This makes no sense. My brother never displayed an ounce of depression. Why wouldn't he leave a note?” “Is this a bad joke or a sweet dream that, after 23 years of marriage and no kids, we are suddenly pregnant with twins? Oh, Lordy.” “How can this be? Yesterday he told me he loved me like it was just a normal day. Today, he's gone. Packed up and gone.”

If Mary got over her dismay rather quickly, Joseph could not have. Imagine yourself in his place, the left-out mate of a pregnant teenager, pummeling your conscience

every night at bedtime: “How can this be?!” It was like an evening version of Mary’s morning sickness.

None of the unexpected circumstances that enter our lives ask for our permission. They just show up, usually without an angel hanging around to explain them. They appear on the doorstep of our hearts without warning. Some of them send us reeling; others send us dancing. Either way, the adventure of faith starts the moment we decide that we are going to deal with these unplanned encounters. Mary’s exemplary “yes” remains a model for the ages. She faces the in-con-ceivable truth that God would choose her for the burden and joy of this birth. And, she accepts it all.

The word Mary takes to heart is the same word we aim to hear every time life surprises us or beats us up: “Nothing will be impossible with God.”

Notes

1 Adam Nagourney, “Honolulu Shores up Tourism with Crackdown on Homeless,” *The New York Times*, June 22, 2014.

2 Luke 1:27.