

Advent Preaching 1991: Imaging the Future

W. Sibley Towner

Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia

It is by now an axiom among us that we get the future that we deserve, which is the very one that we are preparing for ourselves right now. We prepare our future by doing very concretely bad things to our planet (burdening it with rusting weapons and nuclear waste, for example) and by doing very concretely good things to it (taking steps to control toxic emissions and mandating recycling programs, for example). But we also prepare for the future by putting images out there of what the future will give to our human successors and what it will demand of us and them. And that work of imaging is one for which the preaching of the church has special responsibility. From the writers of Holy Scripture itself down to the present day, we preachers have tried to offer word pictures of alternative futures for humankind. And we have always done it with particular urgency during the season of Advent, when the story of the announcement to the lowly woman of Nazareth of the coming of our Lord is the preview of the coming of our Lord in glory before the eyes of the whole world.

A perusal of the texts set in the lectionary for the Advent season quickly reveals the profound extent to which they speak of the coming age. With one exception, in all three lectionary cycles the Old Testament texts are drawn from the eschatological oracles of the Latter Prophets. The one exception is the messianic oracle of 2 Samuel 7:8-16 (Advent 4, Cycle B), which is itself the words of the prophet Nathan announcing the establishment of a new world order centered on the elect and anointed son whom God promises to David. Many of the epistle lections, too, have eschatological themes; if they are not outright portrayals of the age to come, they at least encourage Christians to prepare for the coming of the Lord Jesus with all his saints (1 Thess. 3:13). Though the Gospel lessons are not exclusively devoted to images of the future, in all three cycles the texts for the first Sunday in Advent (this year Luke 21:25-36) are taken from the "little apocalypses" of the Synoptic Gospels. Other texts deal with John the Baptist (Advent 2, Cycles B and C; Advent 3, Cycle A) or the Magi (Advent 2, Cycle A)—in other words, with forerunners of the new age. Of course, the fourth Sunday in Advent always is devoted to the Annunciation; this year the Magnificat is stressed, and it contains a stunning evocation of a time of equity and blessing which is both past and future.

The prophetic texts for Advent tend to stay on that side of the Bible's faith about the future that we call "realistic" eschatology. In other words, they speak not so much of world cataclysm and of all-consuming fire as of the emergence out of the crisis of the Day of the Lord of the kind of world that God intended should be here all along. In Jeremiah 33:14-16, the text proper for

Advent 1, Cycle C (Dec. 1, 1991), the window onto the future that is opened by the formula "The days are surely coming, says the Lord" reveals a landscape in which a Davidic messianic leader known as "a righteous Branch" springs up to execute justice and righteousness. The brief portrait of the new age given there shows a time of true shalom (all things living together in equilibrium and harmony) in which Jerusalem will live in safety and its name will be *YHWH tsidgenu* "the Lord is our righteousness." In Malachi 3:1-4 (Advent 2, Cycle C—Dec. 8, 1991), there is good news and bad news. A forerunner will come to prepare the way for the Lord of Hosts; but when the latter comes, "Who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire. . . ." (Mal. 3:2). Still in all, the readings from the prophets generally offer images of hope:

Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion;
Shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter of Jerusalem!
The Lord has taken away the judgments against you . . .
(Zephaniah 3:14-15, Advent 3, Cycle C—Dec. 15, 1991).

In Cycles A and B, in addition to the messianic oracle of 2 Samuel 7, the Old Testament texts offer the peaceable kingdom (Isa. 11:1-10), the announcement of the end of judgment with which Deutero-Isaiah opens (Isa. 40:1-11), and the famous "floating" oracle, "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Isa. 2:1-5).

Peace, justice, the preservation of individual human lives, rule by the one of God's own choosing—these are the images of the future that come from the Old Testament texts proper for the Advent season. Many of these, of course, have always been taken by Christians to refer to the first Advent, and they provided the basis upon which New Testament writers set forth the meaning of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. But the overtones of these texts are equally applicable to the second Advent as well, to the onset of God's reign at the Eschaton.

It is worthy of note that the more frightening images of the Day of the Lord, that narrow calendrical passage of fire and turmoil through which the world must pass before it reaches utopia, are found in the Gospel lessons and in the epistles. For example, Lk. 21:25-36 (Advent 1, Cycle C—Dec. 1, 1991) speaks of cosmic changes, signs in the sun, the moon and the stars, and the coming of the Son of Man in a cloud with power and great glory. The old prophetic or "realistic" eschatology has given way here to the imagery of apocalyptic. The picture is projected on the wide screen and becomes more cosmic in scope and ominous in effect. Yet the hope expressed is in continuity with the older imagery: God will establish the new age of justice and equity even if God has to carry away the old world altogether; safe passage through that day of crisis depends entirely upon the Son of Man, whose task it is to see that nothing good and pure is wasted and that all that is worthy is preserved for the new day. The apocalyptic imaging of the future reaches its peak of intensity in

the epistle lesson for Advent 2, cycle B: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed" (2 Peter 3:10).

Whether in the elaborated imagery of apocalyptic futurism or the more realistic and earthy imagery of prophetic eschatology, our biblical tradition provides us images of a future which, though disturbingly chaotic and pivoting on a crisis in which good and evil finally come to a definitive showdown with each other, is nevertheless safely in the hands of God. In short, the Advent images of the Bible come to give us a basis for hope and for action.

Now set over against this dramatic, lyrical, frightening, and yet hopeful set of biblical images are the images of the future that come out of our contemporary secular world. If you ask our futurists, novelists and filmmakers, "What will the world be like in 2091 A.D.?" the images that come back will not, on the whole, be very encouraging. Oh, sure, you will hear an Alvin Toggler speak of a coming postindustrial era or a new humanism, a time of home industry in the electronic cottage amid nurturing new family configurations and the like. You will hear Frederick Turner advocate the management of human evolution in the direction of a new classical age. But try to think for a moment of a single film or novel that really renders a vision of the future as the kind of place that any of us would want to live in. Just try!

All right, all right. *Star Trek IV* does end up on a mildly hopeful note, and so does the film *Dune*, in which the citizens of some distant planet have a kind of encounter with the holy that looks to be positive for their future. And there is *The Wizard of Oz*, which I take to be a sort of apocalypse for children. But even in Oz—which is after all only the halfway heaven of a dream and whose God-figure proves to be a fake (in *The Wiz*, he is even Richard Pryor, for pity's sake!)—a frightening and deadly struggle between good and evil forces has to occur before self-understanding can occur and peace can ensue. Elsewhere there is *1984*, with its grim, totalitarian future, and Morris West's novel, *The Clowns of God*, in which a nuclear Armageddon is barely and only temporarily averted. In Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Liebowitz*, the survivors of a holocaust slowly rebuild civilization only to destroy themselves all over again when they reach the requisite level of sophistication. In Woody Allen's future, every individual is brain-programmed, love is unknown, and sex is experienced only in government-issued orgasmatrons. One of the most powerful modern literary evocations of the future is Russell Hoban's novel, *Riddley Walker*. It pictures a postholocaust world in which primitive human beings scratch out a meagre existence in competition with packs of dogs, and in which the dim memory of the blast is preserved only by the tribal storyteller.

A good future requires a lot of work beginning right now; love and peace don't happen by accident, but only through diligent nurturing. If we give up in pessimistic resignation and let the future just happen, our children may well see realized the darkest fantasies of the science fiction writers' imagination. Worst of all, they might not live at all because life will have been annihilated by a cataclysm of human fabrication.

We are engaged in a battle of images of the future. For my part, when it

comes to picking which set of images by which to try to steer our course, I would rather turn away from the painful pictures painted by our peers and embrace instead the promises of God. These promises are mediated to us through the entirely different set of images that come from the heart of our biblical tradition and are proper for the season of Advent. And amazing images they are. The messages of Deutero-Isaiah come from a frightened, vulnerable exilic community; the messages of the Gospels and epistles come from the marginal, perishing Christians of the apostolic age. Yet somehow by the light of the fires that consumed the securities of their day, they caught glimpses of the city of God. Like the mother to the troubled child, they could say to their people in the midst of their nightmare, "Everything is going to be all right, because the future is in the hands of God." They say that to us, too, for the future that God disclosed to them has now become our future.

It remains only to say something more about what the images that come from the Advent tradition can and cannot do by way of helping us and our people prepare for the future.

Here is what they *cannot* do. The futuristic texts of the Bible, be they drawn from the realistic eschatology of the prophets or the "little apocalypses" of the Gospels, are narratives with a history-like quality. But they are not history written in advance. The detailed images of the future in these texts—the wolf lying down with the lamb, the changing of the sun and the stars, the flame that consumes the whole world—are not like a satellite photo of the road ahead. If someone wants a map of the future, let her check with the demographers, the economic forecasters, the readers of trends and the writers of fiction. They can give us a crude map good for up to five years. The astrophysicists can extend it a light year or two beyond that, though they cannot personalize our route with magic markers. The details of the future in the biblical texts are not to be taken as predictions, but rather as the warp and woof of a rich tapestry of biblical vision. That tapestry does not map the future for us. It evokes it. And you have to look at the whole tapestry to get the message.

What is the message, then? It is simple, it is absolutely the divine intention to complete the work of blessing in this beloved world. Whatever good has been done will be vindicated, and evil in all its forms will be taken absolutely seriously and overcome absolutely. Nor will God's victory be foreshortened by waste. God will overcome in such a way that every knee will bow and every tongue confess God's sovereign authority.

Now we can talk about what these texts and their images *can* do to help us prepare for the future. The answer: they can help us give to the Christian life the contours appropriate for living in between the times, before God brings in the new age.

You know that only God can do that. That conviction rings out of all the biblical texts that image the future at Advent. *We* cannot bring in the kingdom of heaven on earth. That responsibility is not one of the contours appropriate to the Christian life now. Our culture has had its share of utopian visions of the future, though they are now largely displaced by dystopian visions. But we can no more accept those utopian visions as realistic goals for our achievement than we can accept the dystopian ones. This is not to say that those utopian

visions were unappealing. Anyone who has ever heard William Blake's poem "Jerusalem" sung at a labor rally or in a working-class United Reformed Church congregation in Wales knows how stirring that vision can be. Listen to it again:

Bring me my bow of burning gold!
Bring me my arrows of desire!
Bring me my spear! O clouds unfold!
Bring me my chariot of fire!
I will not cease from mental fight;
nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,
till we have built Jerusalem
in England's green and pleasant land.

But where is Jerusalem in Mr. Major's England? Where is the thousand-year Reich or the workers' paradise? Whatever became of the Holy Commonwealth of Massachusetts or New Harmony, Indiana? Sorry, William Blake. That's how it goes with human-made utopias. Only God can bring in the new age.

If that responsibility is set aside, then, the Advent images must come to help us give our Christian life a different set of contours. If the world that God wants and will certainly bring in is a world without tears, a world of equity wherein right relationships prevail, then here is the shape our life should take now. Let there be no more rich getting richer and poor getting poorer, no more Desert Storms without accompanying programs of reconciliation. Let's go for it!

The Advent images beckon to us, saying, Come on, come on into the future with trust and hope, because the future belongs to God. In your own lives and communities you can give a foretaste now of the coming kingdom, even though you cannot ever bring it in in its fullness. The Advent vision says: The world and the human community are worth loving and protecting at all costs because they are destined by God for full release from their present bondage to sin and decay. Were the world to end in a nuclear bang or in an ecological whimper, the deed would not be God's nor would that end be the culmination of God's purpose that is anticipated in scripture. Such an end would merely be the result of familiar old destructive anger or greed gone haywire. The Christian life should be shaped by Advent positively toward harmonious interdependence with God's other peoples and with the other creatures of God. The contours follow the lines of peace and justice.

The Gospel images of Jesus' life have more power to move us to shape our own futures in the direction of peace and justice than do images from any other part of our literary and intellectual culture. Though they are stories about a life lived long ago, in them we get a foretaste of God's coming victory. In Jesus' ministry of healing, forgiveness, and advocacy we can see clearly how our own futures should look. When we gather with the shepherds in humble adoration at the manger side or stand with the women in joy before the empty tomb, or reach out with the apostles to touch a leper in the name of Jesus, the new Jerusalem is already anticipated, the river of life begins to flow, the wolf

lies down with the lamb. And all of this is but the first blush of what is to come.

Do you see how vital are the images of the future that come to us at Advent? They may be the thin line that separates a viable and peaceful human future from chaos. Our people desperately cry for such images, and deeply wish to accept them as clues to the destiny of us all. Lift up this light that all may see the way ahead! The Advent way is the way to go, the winsome, blessed way to go. Who would not want to go this way?

As the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations
(Isa. 61:11, Advent 3, Cycle B).