

Preaching Advent Hope at the Beginning of the New Millennium

Stephen Farris

Knox College, University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada

The season of Advent is not merely a yearly rehearsal of the events that led to the first coming of Jesus. During Advent the church also waits for something, the second coming of Jesus. At the end of the second millennium we had better face the truth. The church has been playing a this waiting game a long, long time. The delay of the coming of the Lord was a problem even in the period the later books in the Bible were written. "With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day," answered one preacher (II Peter 3:8). But now it's two thousand years and by human standards that's a long time indeed. That makes preaching Christian hope as the millennium turns a very difficult task.

I learned about hope in a book I read as a teenager, *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl.¹ It was the kind of book that was quoted in sermons in the sixties, but that should not be held against it. I haven't heard it mentioned for some years now, so perhaps it needs to be recalled to memory. Viktor Frankl was a Jewish psychiatrist in Vienna in the 1930's. After the Nazi takeover of Austria, he was sent to one of the concentration camps. As a doctor he was of some use to his captors and so was kept alive. The conditions in the camp were so appalling that there was good reason for anyone to die. Beyond the casual beatings, the starvation, the disease, and the executions, there was an electrified fence that encircled the camp. Any prisoner wishing a quick escape from misery need only leap upon it. Frankl noticed that in this hellish setting those with a religious faith, the devout Christians, the pious Jews, the committed communists, were more likely to survive. Their religion or ideology gave them a framework into which to fit their sufferings. This gave meaning and in turn meaning gave hope. Frankl further noted that if any of these people ever lost their hope, they died very shortly thereafter. Perhaps hope is as necessary to human existence in the long run as food and water.

It's hard to say what the people in our churches actually expect of the future. In a more evangelical congregation some may be keenly interested in eschatology. Dispensationalism is a strong emphasis in evangelical circles, and some folk even in the historic churches are likely to be influenced by it. In a more liberal congregation, on the other hand, many may consider such expectations a joking matter. "Did you hear the one about the fundamentalist who...?" Perhaps the people in many of the pews don't seriously hope for anything anymore. Their answer to the question of the Future with a capital "F" is simply not to think about it. I suspect many of us in the so-called mainline churches are so accustomed to the slow loss of membership and influence in society that we actually hope for very little except to live out our time as faithfully as possible. Our churches are starving for lack of hope.

One sort of hope that a preacher might offer lies in the inevitability of human progress. Certainly, when one compares the technology of 1000 A.D. with that of 2000 A.D. it is apparent that there have been remarkable advances. But the odd thing is that popular culture does not seem genuinely to expect that technological progress will lead

to a utopia.² Consider the dark versions of a post-apocalyptic future in so many movies, from the classic *1984* to *Gattica*, *Mad Max* and the soggy failure, *Waterworld*. Nor is there in our culture any evidence of a widespread optimism that human nature is changing for the better. Observe the cynicism of the picture of life in the home city of this very journal in Tom Wolfe's recent novel, *A Man in Full*. When we turn from the movies and literature to the newspapers, the picture is hardly more encouraging. It is impossible to predict what horrors will fill the media when this article is actually published. That there will be horrors is a sure thing.

An optimistic view of progress is fading fast with the last days of the millennium, and beneath our apparent prosperity there is a widespread malaise. Is it the hole in the ozone layer or global warming, or the inescapable sour taste of our pollution that causes this angst? Or is the turn of the millennium itself the cause of the anxiety? In any case a cheery, Pollyanna vision of the future doesn't wash with most of our society. Nor ought we to preach it since it is neither believable nor identifiably Christian.

Social critic Christopher Lasch wrote: "If progressive ideologies have dwindled down to a wistful hope against hope that things will somehow work out for the best, we need to recover a more vigorous form of hope, which trusts life without denying its tragic character...."³ If we alter the end of the sentence to read "which trusts God without denying life's tragic character," we have stated the preacher's aim at the end of the second millennium.

A specifically Christian sort of hope is expressed in the Apostles' Creed, "From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead." The remainder of the creed, all the wonderful affirmations concerning the Holy Spirit, the church, "the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting" must be read in that eschatological context. The church in its present reality is holy and catholic in large part because it possesses a Christ-centered hope. If the church loses its hope or if that hope becomes vague, diffuse, and impersonal, it ceases to be the church. For the church the future has a name and that name is Jesus. With respect to hope, "It's personal."

The doctrine of the second coming of Jesus Christ, often called in evangelical circles "the blessed hope," is the church's answer to the question, "Is this all there is?" If what we have now is indeed all there is, the Christian enterprise is a failure. At best it would be like visiting an extinct volcano, awed by the power once unleashed. At worst, it would be like wanderers in the wilderness, cold and hungry, stretching out their hands over the ashes of a long dead fire and saying, "Once there was heat and fire in this place." The early church did not doubt that more was yet to come. They stretched out their hands to heaven and cried, "Maranatha, come Lord Jesus!" But for many of us and certainly for society as a whole, the doctrine of the second coming has become the property of a disreputable fringe waiting hopelessly on a hillside for a savior who never arrives. It may not be the preacher's task, nor may it be possible, to make the Christian hope believable to secular listeners. But it is our task to bear witness as compellingly as possible to that hope.

I take this Christian hope to include at least the following: that God remains active in the world, that God's purposes will finally triumph, that the clue to the nature of that triumph is in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and that the final triumph of God will involve a manifestation of Jesus Christ. I recognize much of the imagery associated with the second coming, "Lo, he comes with clouds descending..." as

symbolism, but to say something is a symbol is not to say that it is therefore unreal. Nor do I believe we can do without symbolism. I do not pretend that it is easy to preach that hope; I do affirm that, especially at the turning of the times, it is vital.

One of the difficulties about preaching hope is that it can get too big and too general. An appropriate homiletical strategy is to take specific texts, such as those laid out in the lectionary and interpret them faithfully in light of our concern for the future.

A much loved text for the season is Mary's Magnificat.⁴ This ancient psalm appears at two points in the common lectionary readings as the replacement for the psalm on either the third or fourth Sunday of Advent. It, like the preacher, has a time problem. Note the aorist or past tense of the key verbs. "The Mighty One has done great things for me..."; God "has filled the hungry with good things." God "has helped his servant Israel." Scholars have had difficulty with these past tense verbs over the years. Sometimes they are interpreted as the rare gnomic aorist, the equivalent of the present, representing what God habitually and regularly does. The paraphrase of the psalm, *Tell Out My Soul*, that appears in our hymnbooks follows this strategy.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of His might:
Powers and dominions lay their glory by;
Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,
The hungry fed the humble lifted high.

This reading makes sense. Such things do happen from time to time. Think of the people driving the Phillipine dictator Ferdinand Marcos into exile leaving behind his wife Imelda's closet of three thousand shoes. Or think of Stalin dying alone and in appalling pain because his servants and cronies feared even to enter his room without his bidding. Flash forward then to the sight of youths dancing atop the tumbling Wall and the sound of the Berlin Philharmonic playing the Ode to Joy from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony underneath the Brandenburg gate. Such things do happen, and by faith we are persuaded it is because God has willed it so.

But new tyrants arise and the hungry are with us always. So some scholars call this an eschatological hymn. The singers of such a hymn are so certain that God will act in the near future to save the people that they can speak as if it has already happened. We see such passages in Deutero-Isaiah:

Sing, O heavens for the Lord has done it;
Shout, O depths of the earth ...
For the Lord has redeemed Israel. Is. 45:23

In a similar manner, we can in faith look forward to the day when the mighty are pulled down from their thrones and the hungry filled with good things. But such hymns are rare in the Bible, and they begin with an imperative, "Sing, O heavens...." This is not simply a grammatical quibble. Such poems are not really hymns of praise in the truest sense. Their true function is not actually to offer praise to God but rather reassurance to the people. They are a summons to trust in God's might and goodness. As such they require an imperative.

But there is an even more important problem, a time problem. Isaiah could call the exiles to trust and within a few years, a decade or two at the most, Cyrus of Persia

released the exiles and they went home rejoicing. But for us it has been two thousand years.

In form, the Magnificat appears to be a hymn that praises God for a particular act, a decisive and wonderful act. Many key scholars identify it and the other hymns of Luke's infancy narratives as hymns of the earliest Palestinian church. The decisive and wonderful thing that has happened is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In him the future has been assured, and because God has triumphed in him it as if all other good things have already happened, too.

Now all this doubtless appeared to be foolishness to the secularists of their time. These earliest Christians in Palestine were poor, they may even have been called just that—the poor. What was said by Paul of the Corinthians was true of most Christian assemblies in those early years, “Not many wealthy, not many of noble birth.” They had by no means seen the full triumph of God, but they had seen Jesus. That was enough of a sign for them. What they had seen already, in the past, gave them confidence for the rest. So they offered their praise:

He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

The sign is in the past and this gives confidence in the present that the future is in good hands.

This interpretation does not rest on a speculative historical reconstruction alone. Consider the hymn in its narrative context. An angel visitant makes an outrageous promise to a young Jewish girl. She will bear a son. “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David” (Lk. 1:32). She has trouble believing this. It is often noted that Mary is the first to doubt the virgin birth: “How can this be since I am a virgin?” But she accepts the word of the messenger, “Here am I the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

At that point, Mary departs to visit her aged kinswoman Elizabeth. The reader knows already from the carefully composed parallel narrative of the birth of John the Baptist that she too is pregnant. In her case too God has done a marvelous thing, giving her a child long after her childbearing years are over. The baby leaps within her and she greets Mary with joy as the “mother of her Lord.” Perhaps all this is a very little thing. Perhaps to the purely human eye the scene means very little. There sit two women, one too old be pregnant and the other, perhaps, a little too young. But to Mary it is a sign of the certain reality of God's blessing. And so she offers praise, “My soul magnifies the Lord.” The progression is straightforward, promise, sign, praise.⁵ This progression is a key for preaching in Advent 1999.

But there is a problem here for the preacher. The hymn is a painting done in great, broad sweeping strokes; the narrative is a detailed watercolor. Do we concentrate on the mighty pulled down from their thrones, or on the two quiet women, the psalm or its context? There is wisdom in Luke's ordering which moves from the simplicity of the context to the spectacle of the hymn. I can believe the mighty are pulled down from their throne because I've seen the women. Seeing the signs of God's work in the small,

quiet things of life gives the confidence that God is at work in the great. Perceiving God's hand in the moment gives hope for the millennium.

There is one more vital observation to be made. The signs point not to human activity but to the actions of God. Consider again the verbs of the Magnificat. The subject of those verbs is God. Mary praises not human achievement but the work of God. It is in God's faithfulness and activity that the Christian gospel calls us to place our hope. A homiletical difficulty here is that the activity of God is likely to be seen among people. The preacher will have to be careful to point not simply to the goodness of Christians (such as it is) but to the love of God behind that goodness.

The progression, promise, sign, praise can be repeated in our advent sermons. The first part, the promise, is easy. Our advent texts are full of promise. More difficult is the matter of the sign. The preacher ought not speak only of the activity of God in the past but seeks signs of that activity in the present. Here is one story of what I take to be a simple, quiet sign of God's work in the world. The story is as accurately told as I am able.

A student at the theological college where I teach travelled to a small Ontario city to preach one very cold winter Sunday. He was sitting in the minister's study gathering his thoughts when a "church lady" burst into the room.

"Jeff," she said to him, "We need your help. A street person has come into the church and he smells awful. I want you to go and throw him out."

Now Jeff is a big man. Any football coach would sign him up on sight for the offensive line, but a real "church lady" is hard to resist. So he followed her out into the sanctuary. Sure enough, there was a street person. He was filthy, his clothes were torn, and he certainly did smell like the inside of a dumpster. But worst of all, he had old cracked shoes and no socks and his bare ankles were blue from the cold of a Canadian winter. Jeff was preaching that day on the parable of the last judgement in Matthew 25, "inasmuch," and he realized that the last thing in the world he wanted to do was to throw the poor fellow out into the street. It was as if he could hear the Master's voice in his ear, "I had no socks and you threw me out into the cold." He steeled himself to speak to the church lady.

But the church lady was not the only person in the sanctuary. Another woman, a better sort of church lady, went into the kitchen and made the man a sandwich. One of the elders sat down next to the man and, oblivious to the stink, engaged him in friendly conversation. And best of all, a little girl perhaps eight years old, came up to the man and gave him a pair of men's socks.

When Jeff told me the story I asked him where the socks had come from. Did they have a clothes closet in that church? He answered no, they did not and that he had no idea where the socks came from.

So here's my guess. It's just a guess, nothing more. When God worked in the girl's heart I think she spoke to her father. I think her father gave her his socks. I think there was a little girl with God's love in her heart that day. And I think her Dad went home that day, with cold feet and a warm heart.

It's nothing much, just a pair of men's socks. But to those with eyes to see, it's the power of God and the love of God.

Hope doesn't come unless we have eyes to see signs of the presence of God. But if we can perceive those signs, there can be hope.

There is the promise and for those with eyes to see there are many signs. And then

comes praise. Consider one last time the verbs of the Magnificat. Is there nothing for humanity to do? Are we merely the objects and never the subjects of the action verbs in the hymn? We are collectively the subject in one key sentence. "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour." Praise is our duty and our delight. Praise is hope set to music. It says that the cosmos despite all appearances is not in the hands of the evil powers but in the hands of God. Those hands reach down to us in love and we reach up in praise. Though our present life is often tragic, tragedy is never the last word. Praise sings and shouts that, though we do not know how God will work it out, the future, like the present and the past, belongs to God.

We can offer praise. And for today, at least, that is enough.

Notes

¹ Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* revised edition, Ilse Lasch trans. (Boston: Beacon, 1963).

² One preacher who is enthusiastic about a technological future is John Killinger. See his recently published book, *Preaching the New Millennium* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999). I find it impossible to share his optimism about either technology or human nature.

³ Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1991), 529-30.

⁴ The exegetical background for much of what follows appears in my book *The Hymns of Luke's Infancy Narratives: Their Origin, Meaning and Significance* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985). The classic work on all matter related to the infancy narratives remains Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977).

⁵ This pattern also holds true for the other hymns of Luke 1 and 2, the Benedictus, Lk. 1:68-79, and the Nunc Dimittis, Lk. 2:29-32.