

*Old Visions Finding Their Youth Again*¹

F. Harry Daniel

First Presbyterian Church, Paducah, Kentucky

The list of our world's ills is frightening, alarming, overwhelming, and paralyzing. The debt of third world nations is a vexed, economic problem with painful effects for people already desperately poor. The renewed cold war and the ever present threat of nuclear holocaust have raised the question of human survival. War in Central America, political instability in the Middle East, the agonies of apartheid in South Africa—all remind us how inhuman our world really is. Millions of refugees, the growing numbers of poor abroad and here in this country, and the plight of the elderly are part of the profound human plight of our time.

Yet there are small signs of hope. North and South Koreans are talking to one another about the relief of human misery in the midst of natural disasters.² Soviet and American Christians are rediscovering each other and the unity shared in Christ that even transcends ideologies. The mentality of cynicism with its belief that we are locked into a closed system with no future has been ever so slightly breeched. Humanity can be affirmed and the future does remain open. Can the breach be widened?

Re-visioning

Much of the fall political campaign was devoted to the portrayal of visions for the future with the marketing of each distinct version. The power of such visions to mold and shape life are readily apparent. Poised as we Americans are on the brink of an orgy of consumerism that has come to characterize the Christmas season, perhaps it is time for a process of re-visioning for the future, a return to those ancient biblical visions of the future shaped by the Hebrew prophetic tradition. Advent 1984 may become a time for letting the lectionary texts reawaken those ancient visions, so that they may regain their youth again.

Imagining The Future

We may take as our guide Walter Brueggemann's *The Prophetic Imagination*.³ Brueggemann argues that the characteristic of prophetic imagination which both the prophets and Jesus possessed is worth imitating today. Prophetic imagination is the process of nurturing a vision of the future that is open to the free and creative work of God, a vision that is an "alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us."⁴ The prophets understood the compelling power of language to speak in ways that call forth such visions. The function of such visions is both to criticize the

world in which we live and to energize us to move forward into a future shaped by the vision. In a wearied, trapped culture which envisions no future, but a continuation of the present, the vision is the means through which is generated the capacity and readiness to live, to love, to care, to suffer, to feel, to weep, to grieve, even to die for the future promised and nourished by God in and through the vision. The prophets engage in re-visioning a future with and open to God and describe that future with energizing metaphors and symbols. "The prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined. . . . It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing alternative futures."⁵

The final task of the prophet is to bring people to engage the vision and the newness manifest in it. The vision redefines the situation moving beyond the givens enabling new gifts to be given. The prophet offers symbols from the memory and tradition of Israel which are used to shape the future. The words shape a new consciousness and define a new reality,⁶ leading us to realize how unacceptable are the conditions for humanness that we have accepted and taken for granted as "the way it is." The prophet sets before us the reality of God in the very center of the scene from which we presume he had fled.⁷ That realization sets free both the responses of amazement and praise. Such a re-visioning can only be received, affirmed, and celebrated. A ministry in this context "seeks to penetrate despair so that new futures can be believed in and embraced by us."⁸

Preaching in Advent 1984 can become the occasion to reawaken and nourish these ancient visions in our congregations and thereby to open up new, fresh, and creative alternatives in which we may invest our lives opening them to the grace and freedom of God. Evoking and representing these visions is the hermeneutical task.

Wait a minute! Aren't such visions just utopias and therefore unrealistic? No! We are not talking about a retreat into an unreal, consoling future. Rather, we are talking about drawing the future which is God's into our present and living already by it.⁹ Such visions alter us and the way we live, revealing ever new possibilities. They may also produce greater suffering and pain, for they are cross-shaped. But that is where God chooses to begin: hope where there seems to be none,¹⁰ a future where there seems to only the present, an openness where there seems to be only closedness, energy and passion where there seems to be only lethargy and passiveness.

The Old Testament lectionary texts for Advent drawn from 2nd and 3rd Isaiah and 2 Samuel are the products of prophetic imagination in Brueggemann's sense. They provide some of the classical components of the vision of God's future for his people. These same components are at work in the other suggested Old Testament texts. And they in turn find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ and are reinterpreted in the New Testament to provide clues to the ultimate fulfillment of God's future at the end of time.

Advent 1—Visions of the Future: God's Work

Both Old Testament texts fall loosely in the genre of a lament, bemoaning the absence of God's envisioning, life-giving presence because of the sin of the people. For 3rd Isaiah, the absence of the Father-Redeemer (63:16) has led to the dissolution of community (vs.16bc), a compelling sense of divine judgment (vs.17), a loss of holiness (vs.18), and the destruction of a sense of identity and integrity (vs.19). In short, this people has no future. Their only hope is that God will act in the deteriorating situation. The prophet pleads for a theophany greater than that of Sinai (64:1-4) on behalf of the entire nation (vss. 5-8). Without a vision this people will perish. The situation has reached desperate straits.

There is in the text an extraordinary confidence in God. Though the group portrayed in the lament is not acknowledged by other factions in Israel (63:16), there is the strong conviction that God will acknowledge and respond. The description of God as Father three times (63:16, 64:8) is remarkable and unusual. Only God can provide the life-shaping purpose for his people. They wait for him to act (64:4b) and to create anew the people (vs.8). Any future in that situation is a divine gift. That a future is possible is born of a stubborn faith that God is still able and willing to respond, though the situation itself offers no justification for such assurance.

Psalms 80:1-7 is a plea to the Shepherd of Israel to exercise once again his loving care for the people. The peoples' sin has been punished (vss. 5-6) sufficiently. The movement between symbols of tenderness (vs.1a) and symbols of power (vss.1b,4,7) to describe God reveal both the motives for and the capacity to assure a future.

Both New Testament texts stress that the future is God's, one emphasizing his faithfulness in bringing what has been begun to completion (1 Corinthians 1:8-9), the other describing how we are to prepare for that final, fulfilled future (Mark 13:37).

Advent 2—Visions of Steadfast Love

The process has begun. God's gift of a future can be received, acknowledged, embraced, shared in, and cooperated with. "Salvation is at hand" (Psalms 85:9). All four texts make that point though in differing ways. For Mark the vision is becoming a reality through John the Baptist who inaugurates the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God (Mark 1:1-8). In John the promise of Isaiah 40:3 is fulfilled. The Lord who is coming is Jesus Christ. He is the Shepherd who will care for and feed his flock (Isaiah 40:11). For 2 Peter, final consummation of the vision is not yet, but the Lord is at work (2 Peter 3:9). The vision of God's victory is certain.

In Isaiah 40:1-11 the tone of mercy (vs.1), the tender concern (vs.2a), the forgiveness (vs.2b), the good news (vs.9), and the image of the Shepherd (vs.11), coupled with the images of power to accomplish what is willed (vss. 3-5,8,10) all describe a powerful, fulfilling vision of faithful love. That "way" is announced by the Baptist (Mark 1:3). That "way" wills the salvation of all and

the repentance of all (2 Peter 3:9). These texts speak out of the tension between the “already” and the “not yet.” While the latter is not to be ignored, the former is vital to a process of re-visioning.

Psalms 85:10-13 is strikingly similar to the major theological themes of Isaiah 40—55, God’s love and faithfulness and his gifts of righteousness and peace. Well-being and salvation are the components of God’s future.

Advent 3—Visions of Inclusiveness

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 is part of a program in chapters 60—62 in which the ideal community is envisioned by the disciples of 2nd Isaiah.¹¹ In Luke 4:18-19 the first two verses of the text are read by Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth. Luke clearly intends them to be a programmatic summary of Jesus’ ministry. They were addressed to all those who saw little or no evidence of God’s vision becoming a reality. They proclaim the inclusiveness and the totality of God’s salvation: physically, spiritually, individually, and socially. In many respects Isaiah 61:1-4 proclaims the purpose of God’s steadfast love. Some aspects of God’s program are described in vss.8-11: vss.8-9 speak of an eternal covenant of blessing and vss. 10-11 describe the human praise which the promise of such a covenant evokes.

In Jesus the restoration has begun. That is the point of Mary’s Magnificat (Luke 1:46b-55) which is a complex catena of Old Testament phrases, all shaped by a strong sense of divine care, love, and justice. After an expression of Mary’s thankfulness for the fulfillment of God’s promise of a Messiah and her role in that fulfillment (vss.46-49), the canticle shifts dramatically to the theme of God’s exaltation of the poor (vss.50-55). God has not given up on this world with no apparent future; all is not just or right in this world and God is at work doing something about it. Everything which saps, demeans, and destroys our humanity has God’s judgment on it. God’s concern is inclusive and directed especially toward those who are given no place in the human scheme of things.

Along with the other prophetic voices, John 1:6-8, 19-28 adds that of the Baptist to the witness that God is at work through Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 stresses that Christianity is not just a set of responsibilities, but a way of life focused on God that is characterized by joy and thankfulness and a way of life involving obligations toward our neighbors.

Advent 4—The Vision of the Messiah

2 Samuel 7:8-16, Psalms 89:1-4, 19-24, and Luke 1:26-38 are all bound together by the theme of God’s promise to David. The third text is understood as the fulfillment of the messianic interpretation of the first two. When the Davidic line failed and was destroyed by the Babylonian invasions of the sixth century B.C., the Davidic covenant was subsequently understood to refer to a messianic king who would restore David’s kingdom. Applied to Jesus the promise was understood in a much broader less temporal sense. As the king struc-

tured and focused the life of his people in his kingdom, so Jesus focuses and structures the kingdom of God.

Romans 16:25-27 is the concluding doxology to the epistle which praises God for the revelation of his saving purpose in Jesus Christ, a revelation foretold in the "prophetic writings," but now disclosed.

Jesus Christ is the focal point of God's gift of the future. In and through him God's future becomes both a possibility and a reality.

In an age of cynicism and closed futures, these ancient visions invite us to participate in a divine, open, and free vision of a future which rests on the love and grace of God. In an age of small, competing visions, Advent, 1984 can become an invitation to acts of prophetic imagination.

NOTES

¹ With apologies to Howard Thurman, *The Moods of Christmas* (New York: Harper, 1973), 22. Dr. Thurman uses the term "dreams" instead of "visions."

² News reports for the week of Sept. 16th.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁵ Ibid., 45.

⁶ Ibid., 65f.

⁷ Ibid., 69f.

⁸ Ibid., 111.

⁹ Jurgen Moltmann, *Man* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 116.

¹⁰ Ibid., 117.

¹¹ Paul Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 60.