

Sermon for First Sunday in Advent 1986

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Waiting for One Who Has Come: A Sermon on Romans 13:11-14

Readings: O.T. lessons: Isaiah 2:1-5, 9:2-7

N.T. lesson: Romans 13:11-14

Text: Romans 13:11-14

[Editors Note: Shortly after J. Christiaan Beker had completed his major work on the thought of Paul, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought*, some of those closest to him presented him with a challenge. Beker's book had carefully and provocatively explored the apocalyptic character of Paul's thought, but now a new, and equally demanding, task was placed before him. A friend and colleague in biblical studies, another friend engaged in Christian social ministry, and his wife Terri, also involved in social work, urged Beker to address the question of the applicability of what he had said about Paul's apocalyptic. They asked for an understanding of its relevance to the contemporary situation, especially in regard to the ethical responsibility of the church in the world.

Beker accepted this challenge and the result was a second book, *Paul's Apocalyptic Gospel: The Coming Triumph of God*. In this book Beker argues that while contemporary Christians can no longer share Paul's expectation of the imminent arrival of the kingdom, they must not suspend their confidence in the kingdom's coming actualization in historical time. "Unless Christians concentrate their hope on the *concrete occurrence* of God's final incursion into history," he claims, "our hope in the coming transformation of the world is surrendered and our hope in the conquest of the structures of death in our world is made illusory."

In the closing paragraphs of that book Beker states:

Our common Christian life in the world involves an inescapable tension—a tension gravitating between joy and agony. We rejoice in the "already" that is, in the presence of the love of God that in Christ embraces our lives and enables us to anticipate his coming glory; but we also agonize because of the terrifying "not yet," that is, the uncompleted character of God's presence that grips the lives of so many of God's creatures, overwhelming them and often destroying them. And although others may come to terms with "the permanent human condition," Christians are not permitted to do so. Their lives must be a constant prayer of "Our Lord, come". . . .

The seemingly remote themes of eschatology and apocalyptic become very immediate for the preacher on the First Sunday of Advent. On that occasion

the tradition of the church and the scripture selections in the lectionary push the preacher to grapple with issues which were viewed from a respectful distance in seminary and which are, to say the least, far from the concerns of most parishioners. In this light, the Editors have placed yet another challenge before Professor Beker: the creation of a communion *sermon* for the First Sunday in Advent.

In his hope-filled sermon which follows, Dr. Beker has chosen, not surprisingly given his work on Paul, to develop the Epistle Lesson for the day: Romans 13:11-14. The sermon also refers to that day's Old Testament reading, Isaiah 2:1-5, and to Isaiah 9:2-7.]

Waiting for One Who Has Come

Today is the First Sunday of Advent; and Advent is a peculiar season in the Christian year. The Old Testament lessons for the day invite us to return to the Messianic expectations and hopes of Israel and to identify ourselves with Israel's longing for the time that "nations 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. 2:4). However, we Christians have learned to read these prophecies in the light of Jesus Christ: we know that these expectations have been fulfilled spiritually in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the one whose birth we will shortly celebrate on Christmas morning.

Moreover, whenever we gather around the Lord's table, we do so in order to participate in the blessings which Christ—who is the fulfillment of Israel's hope of the new covenant—has given to us.

What then can Advent with its series of apocalyptic readings mean to us—readings which announce not only the blessings of the advent of God but also his terrible judgments which will cover the whole earth?

How can we *wait* for the coming one who *has* come?

How shall we hope for that which has been fulfilled among us in Jesus the Messiah? Is it not true that when Christmas morning arrives three weeks from now, our Advent season will be forgotten because it has been displaced by Epiphany? Is it not true that our stance of hope and expectation will be replaced by our knowledge of its fulfillment? Indeed, we will then sing: "the hope and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." And in the light of our Christmas candles we will realize that the Advent readings from the Old Testament with their cosmic and warlike scenario were simply poetic images and projections of human hope which makes the celebration of Christ all the richer.

However, in our text—Romans 13:11-14—Paul deviates from the habitual way by which we relate Advent to Christmas. Contrary to our promise-fulfillment reading of the Advent season, Paul seems to know something about the question I raised above—"How can we wait for the coming of the one who has come?" In other words, according to Paul, Advent has a strange duality for Christians. After he has spoken in Romans 12 and 13 about the fulfilled blessing of God in Christ for the church and about the ethical mandate which participation in this blessing demands of Christians, he ends up his appeal not

only in pointing to the future advent of God in Christ, but also in grounding the appeal in this future:

Indeed you know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand (Rom. 13:11-12a).

What is so peculiar about Paul's Advent message is that he does not invite us to go back in time, so that we can imagine to appropriate liturgically for a moment Israel's condition and share Israel's Advent message with its pre-Messianic darkness.

Rather he addresses Christians who have—so to speak—already celebrated Christmas and tells them that for them—as well as for Israel of old—they live in a time of Advent: “the night is far gone, the day is at hand” (Rom. 13:12a).

However, how is it possible for Paul to proclaim the coming one in the face of the fact that the coming one *has* come in Jesus our Lord?

It seems to me that this strange duality of Advent in Paul is crucial for our Christian faith. For Christmas can only retain its spiritual significance for us when we celebrate it both as a fulfillment of hope and as a hope for fulfillment.

Indeed, when our sense of fulfillment simply swallows up our hope, the fulfillment tends to become so introverted, subjectivized and spiritualized that Christ ceases to be the hope for the whole world in accordance with the world-encompassing hope of the Messianic Old Testament passages.

In that case our celebration of Christmas *either* disintegrates into a romantic festival which substitutes the pain and suffering of the world outside our windows for Bing Crosby's “Dreaming of a White Christmas”—a secular version of a spiritualistic-ecstatic distortion of Christmas, *or* it confuses the peace of Christ with the peace of fulfilling our diverse greedy commercial needs.

Conversely, when our hope for a world at peace in God's coming kingdom swallows up and drowns the gift of God's peace in Christ, our joy and thanksgiving for “God's inexpressible gift” (2 Cor. 9:15) at Christmastime is negated and we deny that we live in a world which is already radically changed by the Christ-child.

Therefore we must prepare ourselves for Christmas in this time of Advent in terms of that strange duality of fulfillment and hope which characterizes according to Paul the very dynamic of Christian life in faith and hope. Indeed, when we gather during Advent at the Lord's table it is a gathering of thanksgiving, for we give thanks that in the midst of our darkness we may confess with Israel of old according to Isaiah 9 that *we* are “the people who walked in darkness and have seen a great light” and that *upon us* “who dwelt in a land of deep darkness” a “light has shined,” that is, the light of God's benign presence in Christ in the midst of our often bewildered, anxious and sinful lives; *that* light which announces to us: “I will be your God and you will be my children.” Indeed, it is this marvelous light which makes us break forth in song and joy during Advent.

And yet—let there be no mistake: the eucharist we celebrate can be no

end in itself. We must remember with Paul

as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death *until he comes* (1 Cor. 11:26).

Our eucharist of thanksgiving is only an anticipation and enacted prophecy of that final Messianic gathering when all people in our world will enjoy the peace of God's love—an anticipation of that time when the present dawn of God's salvation in Christ will burst forth into full day and when the night—of which Paul speaks—will have fully passed. Indeed, in that day says John of the book of Revelation:

God himself will be with his people and will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more, neither mourning nor crying nor pain any more (Rev. 21:3,4).

Let us then celebrate in this Advent the Advent of God's coming in Christ, joyful that he who has given *us* his love has promised that same love for a world, not only caught "in the works of darkness, in reveling and drunkenness, in debauchery and licentiousness" (Rom. 13:13), but also torn apart by the power of death in its pain and suffering.

And so let us say to each other on this Advent along with Paul:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope (Rom. 15:13).