

# *Advent and the Canaanite Alternative*

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An old *New Yorker* cartoon shows George trying to cut back a berserk vine that has already circled the house several times, pinning George himself to the wall. His wife sees the tip of the vine rounding the corner of the house and screams, "Here it comes again, George!"

There are people inside and outside the church who are uneasy with the prospect of one more "holiday season," one more celebration of Advent. Here it comes again, George! The uneasy ones, inside and outside the church, get depressed because they have spotted the language and ritual of the season as counterfeit.

In the culture at large, all manner of psychological and emotional disorders become acute at this time of year. The programmed expectation of peace and joy and conviviality and giving can be excruciating for people whose real experience of life is loneliness, conflict, grief, loss, and the cold chill of chronic disappointment. The preacher at Advent knows how deep that hurt can be. She will find ways to let such people recognize their own stories in what she says about the authentic human hurt that belongs to a proper celebration of Advent.

There is a kind of theological depression, inside the church, that is close kin to the psychological and emotional disorders that flare up at this time of year. We have rehearsed the mystery of Advent annually, for longer than anyone can remember, beginning with "O come, O come, Emmanuel" and concluding with "Joy to the World." For many thoughtful Christians, the programmed expectation of the Advent season only counterfeits the authentic need and the authentic longing of our contemporary world for peace, for love, for justice, for joy. Current lectionaries reflect their concern to keep Advent from becoming a month-long head start on the celebration of Christmas. Let this be a time when the church recognizes that Christians also belong to the social and political and economic networks that threaten and diminish and destroy human life on the planet. *All* life, for that matter. Let the longing of Advent become the passionate contemporary longing of the Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom *come*! Thy will be done *on earth* . . .!"

Pockets of such people here and there in the church have worked hard to give Advent the character of a counter-cultural protest. They have tried to provide Christians with alternative ways to celebrate Advent and Christmas, to confront head-on the contemporary realities our conventional celebrations tend to fuzz over and conceal. Yet the mass of Christians seem to regard these approaches as an ill-tempered "Bah! Humbug!" at the very time when we ought to be saying "God bless us, every one!" The counterfeit of God's peace, God's love, God's justice, God's righteousness, and God's joy seems to be vastly more

attractive to the church than the real thing. The annual effort to sound a different note can become a theologically depressing affair, more depressing and apparently more futile with the coming of each new Advent season. The preacher at Advent knows how deep this hurt can be. He will find ways to let such people recognize their own stories in what he says about the authentic human hurt that belongs to a proper celebration of Advent.

Is there another kind of hurt the preacher needs to take into account, both in the church and in the culture at large, while preparing sermons for Advent? Is it present among people who are always eager for the advent of Advent (or the "Holiday Season"), no matter how many times they have been through it before? You may risk the judgment that they are eager to celebrate all the wrong things, in all the wrong ways, and for all the wrong reasons. They may seem to be turning their backs on the harsh realities of this present unredeemed world. They may seem to be trying to lose themselves in excesses of nostalgia and sentimentality that have no permanent bearing on the real issues of love and justice and peace that confront us daily, year in and year out, regardless of the season.

Yet inside and outside the church the preacher can detect a longing, hurting cry in such annual fits of celebration. It is the cry for a star that is *not* tinsel, a peace and a joy and a love that are *not* programmed or unreal, a quality of wholeness in human life that is *not* counterfeit. Let there be one time in the year, so their celebrations imply, when visions of what *ought* to be frankly take precedence over any pessimistic assessment of how things really are. The distance between the vision they celebrate and the reality they live in is the measure of the concealed hurt that shapes their celebration. Preachers at Advent know how deep this hurt can be. They will find ways to let such people recognize their own stories in what is said about the authentic human hurt that belongs to a proper celebration of Advent.

I detect something of the beauty as well as the destructive temptation of the Canaanite alternative in these various responses to the annual celebration of Advent. The beauty and the temptation can both be seen in what happened to the annual celebration of Passover in the setting of a chronically Canaanite culture, according to the Hebrew Bible.

There is an obvious tension between the Exodus event and the Passover celebration itself. According to the story, Exodus happened only once, at a particular time, under particular circumstances, in a particular place. In that once-for-all event, God created a new kind of relationship between God and Israel. The whole future of Israel's life together with God was to be based on this indelible memory of an unexpected liberation and an unprecedented level of responsibility on Israel's part to hold up the human end of the relationship. In the interest of keeping this memory vivid and contemporary, Israel is to carry out an annual celebration in which the event of Passover is somehow *re-presented*, made present again, for each new generation. It can be called an act of deliberate corporate *memory*, but something more than merely remembering is surely involved. Israel is to *participate* in the memory as if we who are alive now, in a very different time and place, were somehow there on the night which was unlike all other nights. *Our* life is somehow threatened by the

destroying angel who brought death to the first born of Egypt. *We* have been unaccountably spared by the blood of the lamb that is sprinkled on our doorpost. *We* have made ready for the hasty journey into the uncharted wilderness, out of the house of bondage, toward the land of God's promise. By implication at least, the covenant responsibility disclosed at Sinai is also *our* responsibility (regardless of the technical question as to whether this was an integral part of the earliest celebration of Passover).

On this reading, Passover was never intended to become merely repetitive and timeless. The key issue of each Passover celebration was the quality of Israel's life together with God *now*, in this particular time, under these particular circumstances, in this particular place. Will God prove faithful to this Passover memory of who God is and what God is up to with Israel? Will Israel prove faithful to this Passover memory of unexpected liberation and unprecedented responsibility to hold up the human end of this relationship? And what shape will our present and future story with this Passover God take in *our* time? Be faithful. And watch. And wait.

The tension between the Exodus event and the Passover celebration itself, however, comes from the powerful, rhythmic beat of annual observance, especially in a Canaanite setting. The beauty of the Canaanite alternative is that it participates deeply in the universal human need for what is recurring and familiar and reliable. There is something in us that does not love a surprise. Most of the surprises that greet us in the incidents and accidents of everyday life are unpleasant. Even pleasant surprises can be unsettling unless we are able to fit them into a familiar scheme of things and rely on them and anticipate their return. Confidence comes from being in touch with things that never really change, regardless of the surprising happenings that make life unpredictable and uncontrollable.

It is perhaps mistaken to write off the Canaanite alternative as a naive or vicious idolization of the rhythms and processes of nature. Nothing is more self-evident or universal in all human experience than our shared awareness that all life on the planet is governed by the rhythm of birth, nutrition, maturation, procreation, aging, death, and new birth. This rhythm is self-evidently bound up together with the rhythms of the lunar and solar years, the recurring winds and tides, the seasons of rain and cold, dryness and warmth. It requires little mythic imagination to expand these regularities to embrace unpredictable aspects of the same natural order, such as wild storms, earthquakes, lightning and thunder, pest and plague, drouth and flood. Recognizing these regularities, the Canaanite alternative simply sets out to honor them, and to organize human life in relationship to them in the interest of survival and the maximum enhancement of human well-being.

It is not hard to detect here, at a deeper level, what David Tracy calls the "blessed rage for order" (borrowing a phrase from Wallace Stevens). We all have it, in one form or another. It is the universal rage for a human life that *works*, for wholeness, for belonging, for permanence, for joy. It is surely one of the lovelier things about us. The Canaanite alternative simply recognizes the longing for what it is, links it to the most convincing set of regularities we know about, and provides a calendar and ritual for its celebration. Its regular

and predictable annual return, regardless of what else may be going on in the world, provides the fragile hope that the longing is not in vain. We may not be able to celebrate its fulfillment, but by gum we can celebrate the longing and the hope.

Place Passover in this Canaanite setting, and the beauty and power of the Canaanite alternative begins to take over. Exodus recedes farther and farther into the past as a particular event, under particular circumstances, at a particular time in Israel's story. The once-for-all event becomes timeless and eternally contemporary. It becomes another variation on the universal theme of the "blessed rage for order." No matter what else may be going on in the world at the moment, we can *predict* Passover. We can *program* anticipation of the night which is like no other night. We can *be* there when the angel of death passes us by, and make ready for the eternal journey, into the eternal wilderness, in the direction of the eternal, promised land. All else may surprise us, but Passover is as sure and reliable as the annual seasons of planting and harvest. It will always be there, the silver wings that bear up our fragile human hopes. The rhythm of the celebration tends to become more convincing than the bizarre memory itself, so subtly, and so understandably.

This canaanization of Passover bears a passing resemblance to what has become of conventional Advent celebrations. It accounts for the deep resonances between what often goes on in our churches during Advent and what goes on in the culture at large during the holiday season, so that people can move rather comfortably from one kind of celebration to the other, from Jesus and Mary to Santa and Rudolph. It may be that people are celebrating the wrong things, in the wrong ways, for the wrong reasons. But account must be taken of the concealed hurt, the concealed longing, and even the concealed hope, the concealed beauty, of the Canaanite alternative. Nor should we underestimate its enormous power, especially in our own case.

Thoughtful Christians are fully aware that the surprising God of whom the Bible speaks could not bear to see God's people dissolve the celebration of Passover into a celebration of the "Eternal Return." The God of Passover insists on being the covenant-making, covenant-keeping, history-making Lord of the here and the now. Through the shocking words of the prophets and through surprising turns in the story of Israel, God keeps on challenging the Canaanite alternative. What is self-evidently recurring and reliable and universal in human experience is disclosed as fundamentally misleading with respect to the relationship between God and people. The key issue of every Passover celebration remains the quality of Israel's life in relationship to God in this particular time, under just these particular circumstances, in this particular place.

People who read the Bible in this way tend to take a prophetic view of our Advent celebrations. They are pledged to resist the Canaanite alternative. They refuse to let the rhythm of the annual celebration become more convincing than the bizarre memory it purports to celebrate. They are called by Advent faith to face the present world of injustice and suffering and oppression and death as the place where the Lord of Advent is present and working. They are committed, by the grace of God and by the power of God's Spirit, to *be*

there on behalf of those who suffer, in the way of Christ. Their most heartfelt prayer at Advent really is "Thy kingdom come! Thy will be done *on earth . . .*"

Yet the power of the Canaanite alternative may have its impact on them, too. They can easily become fatigued, and resentful, and depressed because so few of their fellow Christians seem to get the point, or seem to be willing to do anything about it. For that matter, their own track record will not bear close scrutiny. Another Advent approaches. Where will we muster the energy to say all the same old things, one more time, when we already know the programmed Christmas carols in the shopping malls will drown us out, and the candlelight Christmas Eve service will go on as usual, and the world will go on trembling on the brink of self-destruction. There are deep resonances between the attitudes of such people toward Advent and the attitudes of their secular counterparts toward the programmed expectation of the holiday season: a shared anxiety and disgust, a common dread. They have spotted the counterfeit, and the genuine article is nowhere to be seen.

Perhaps both have been cunningly captured by the Canaanite alternative they each reject in different ways. They have given the calendar the same rhythmic power over their attitudes and actions that it holds over the devotees of Baal. Their recurring and familiar and reliable human experiences—experiences of rejection and defeat and futility—have become the dominating realities on the basis of which they deal with everything else. Their depression becomes acute because it is that time of year again. They have solid reasons to expect their pain to increase. The counterfeit time of programmed expectation is about to begin. Here it comes again, George!

The preacher at Advent may find herself somewhere in this spectrum of attitudes towards Advent, among a people who are always too ready to knuckle under to the Canaanite alternative and celebrate the wrong things, in the wrong ways, for the wrong reasons. The various hurts indicated here, along with others you will think of, render your congregation what Walt Brueggemann aptly calls a "community of hurt" (re-read his "Advent/Christmas" in *Proclamation 3, Series B*, Fortress Press, 1984).

In the face of all this, the preacher will do well to remember that the first Advent happened because of, and on behalf of, hurting people who chronically celebrate the wrong things, in the wrong ways, for the wrong reasons. That is to say, *us!* (Romans 5:8). God does not propose to leave us sitting in darkness, eternally captive to the Canaanite alternative. By the grace of God, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are also empowered to become a "community of hope." The predictable round of recurring experiences has no lordship over us. The Lord whose history-making Advent we are privileged and bound to remember, can and will make new history among us now. The confidence of faith is only that the future into which we now move will be surprising, and yet surprisingly faithful to the memory of Advent entrusted to us. Our part is to be faithful. To watch. To wait. To risk obedience. To pray "Thy kingdom come! Thy will be done *on earth . . . !*"