

Something New

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What more can you say about Christmas? The stories have been told over and over again. Books, magazines, all sorts of publications are crammed with carols, poems, anecdotes, stories, recipes, and what-have-you for Christmas. So when another Christmas season rolls around, we don't relish the thoughts of digging through our well-thumbed books trying to find something different and unusual to say. Like preaching in the Easter season, the preacher is faced with the impossible task of trying to express the inexpressible. More than just coming up with one more original and arresting illustration, it is trying to put into human language what transcends human experience and understanding. But therein also lies the thrill of preaching the incredible events of Christmas. Like the tongue-tied shepherds and the awe-struck parents, we are up to our ear lobes in mystery, wonder, and the fulfillment of the "hopes and fears of all the years." If there is a point where the Gospel breaks into the forces and obsessions of our society so that life is recreated, tears are wiped away, and hopes finally fulfilled, then surely it is at Christmas.

We may not be able to say much more about Christmas that is fresh and novel and interesting, but maybe we can say a whole lot more about Advent, thus putting our Christmas words into their most arresting and powerful context. It goes without saying that the celebration of Christmas has been so packaged in consumerism and romanticism that we and our parishioners have not heard for some time what it is and Who it is that is expected and yearned for.

If in the Christmas celebrations the sharp focus of the clear white light is on the birth of the baby Jesus, then it is important to realize that the light is composed of all the colours of the spectrum of Advent. To bring to the Christmas proclamation the exacting themes of Advent, and to declare them fulfilled in the Incarnation is, to me, preaching with an exciting and liberating edge to it.

I want to remind us of these themes of Advent by noting some of the texts of the four Sundays of Advent and then focusing them in the preaching of Christmas. As a preliminary step, however, I want to look at a strategy for preaching in Advent which may assist the preacher in proclaiming the word of Christmas in a way which permits our listeners to hear the Gospel in fresh tones. I am calling it preaching pastorally, and it is not so much a style or strategy as it is a recognizing what is going on with the listener when we are preaching. As such, it is not something new, rather something old and often taken for granted.

The themes of Advent, symbolized by the strong call for repentance of John the Baptist, challenge to their very roots the values, assumptions, and life-styles of our society. It has been observed by more than one commentator that we can't get to Christmas until we have been out to the wilderness and

listened to the incisive and disturbing words of the Baptizer.¹ They are disturbing themes and come terribly close to home for us all with the result that if they are preached with their full force there could be some very angry and defensive people. So I am suggesting that they be preached pastorally, meaning that the integrity of the text is kept intact, but our sensitivity to the listeners and their needs will permit a hearing of the texts in such a way that they may be liberating rather than offending.

To develop what I am trying to say I would like to draw from a personal experience, then suggest that we “exegete” our congregations, and then finally focus upon the Spirit as an enabler in this approach.

A year ago I met at a conference a woman minister. As we talked, it was evident that she held strong feminist views, and I prepared myself to be defensive, yet as she talked about her feelings as a woman, amidst the patriarchal bias of the church, I felt little defensiveness. Some of her insights and criticisms were enough to make me be very uncomfortable, but I was listening and gaining fresh insights. I came away with an entirely enriched and more empathic view of the place of women in society and the church. I saw room for radical change in my thinking and I was, most importantly, willing to make the changes.

What was it that made the difference between a defensive, reactionary response to a person with strong and unsettling views on feminism and an accepting response? It was the pastoral way in which she dealt with all of us. Because she expressed her thoughts in love and sensitivity, it gave me room to acknowledge my chauvinism without feeling threatened or cornered. Because she put forward ideas and feelings in a way which let her humanity show through, I could identify with injustice rather than react to an accusatory finger. I changed many ideas in that week because with *grace* she gave me the room to change.

I use my friend as a model of what I mean by preaching pastorally. Even though the texts of Advent and Christmas stand in sharp contrast to the conventional views of Christmas as a time for “warm fuzzies,” babies, good cheer, and peace on earth thoughts, they may still be proclaimed so that people will hear and respond even though the insightful challenge of these texts may be painful and disturbing. The catalyst of preaching pastorally is Grace: the very essence of God’s approach to wayward and wandering people. Grace is the controlling force of preaching, emitting love, patience, insight, and sensitivity in understanding where people are.

A first step in moving toward preaching pastorally is to ‘exegete’ our congregation. Who are these people we preach to, visit in their homes and hospitals, cry with in death, laugh with in friendship, and rejoice with in birth and marriage? The ministers who know their congregations can no doubt describe a clear and insightful profile of their people. Sociologists can give us helpful perspectives on the values, biases, and forces that drive people. Whatever profile emerges, it will be one which heightens our awareness of who is listening and the needs they bring to the pews each Sunday. It should remind us that people come to their faith commitment in ways that do not fit the textbooks and may not be very edifying or orthodox, but they are there, nevertheless, and their

“faith” is a product of everything from Sunday School Bible stories to cultural assimilation and experience from the school of knocks, hard or otherwise.

So as the people gather over the four weeks of Advent we become very conscious that they bring not only their own ideas and thoughts to the auditing of the Word, they also bring their needs, hurts, and hopes. They will hear a good deal about reversal and inversion of society and the power structure, about the poor, the prisoners, the disabled being liberated and healed while the privileged are torn down and their oppressive powers taken from them. Out of it all a question will arise. Who are the poor, the disabled, the imprisoned? Are they the ones for whom the Christmas collections this year will provide food, gifts, and toys? Are they the starving of the world who live from day to day not knowing if there will be food for their malnourished bodies while Canada’s grain lies unused in bulging granaries? Are they the oppressed of El Salvador or South Africa trying to survive the forces of oppression? Well yes, of course! Then where does that leave the people before us each week? Is the Gospel denied them because they are not poor, oppressed, starving victims of injustice? Is the message of Advent and Christmas one of assault upon their sin and guilt for living in middle America?

It goes without saying that living as we do in the mainstream of a consumer society preoccupied with earning the living that permits us to indulge in the goods and services which we desire, makes our receptivity to a Gospel which is primarily concerned with impoverishment, injustice, and enslavement to powers and values more difficult. But our people “hurt” precisely because of their affluence. They hurt because they sense, however vaguely, that they are prisoners to all sorts of values, powers, gods, and illusions. They sense that the American dream has a nightmarish side to it. They sense that they have been seduced by the illusion of self-sufficiency whereby they have the means, the wealth, the power to have what they want, do what they want, and be what they want. The seducer’s grin is what nightmares of emptiness, hollowness, and discontent are made of. “We are the hollow men (women)” wrote T. S. Eliott earlier this century.

The point of pain is the point of preaching. Walter Brueggemann, in the introduction to his book *Hope within History*, argues that the values of our culture in the power structures of our society are values of hopelessness because they pre-empt the possibility that out of the events of people’s and society’s lives there is an overriding purpose which will prevail in unexpected and surprising ways.² The message of Christmas is overwhelmingly hope, a critically important word for those who are enslaved whether they know it or not. The hope for a Messiah, the Anointed One, the Liberator who makes all things new, who does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. The hope for a Messiah who tears down the structures of hopelessness and brings to pass the new creation, the new life of joy and peace.

Preaching pastorally then is manifesting God’s Grace for God’s people and world, being sensitive to their point of hurt and need, and then recognizing that what preaching Christmas means is preaching the Incarnation of a new beginning. It is a beginning, however, which is not simply a starting over again with new resolve; rather, it is a new creation, a genesis, a radical remaking of

the world we live in. What brings about that new creation is “the Force” (may the Force be with you!), the ever hovering free power of God to forge a new creation in a world unwilling and unable to think of God in anything but the most self-serving of terms. As Walter Brueggemann expressed it:

The “Spirit” is a way the Bible speaks of newness from God which is not at all derived from anything presently available in the world. It is for the Spirit that transforms, that the church waits in Advent. The tired, closed world finally will not be able to resist.³

The Spirit pervades all that is authentic, creative, disturbing, and transforming throughout the texts of Advent. Perhaps the most difficult of all is to realize that the Spirit is not something we can control, build a program around, nor is the Spirit rational and reasonable. The Spirit is utterly “from beyond,” and therefore out of our control. This is the mystery and excitement of preaching pastorally in Advent and Christmas.

In Frederick Buechner’s sermon “The Annunciation,” there are these words:

Something new and shattering is breaking through into something old. Something is trying to be born. and if the new thing is going to be born, then the old is going to have to give way, and there is agony in the process as well as joy, just as there is agony in the womb as it labours and contracts to bring forth the new life.⁴

In the Incarnation a new and shattering reality is breaking through into an old and tired world. As we experience daily in the ongoing changes of our lives, when something new comes, something old gives away. The ending of something in our lives, especially if it is a cherished part, is an agonizing thing. But then again Christ never told us otherwise, and when we discover that losing our lives for His sake is the way we have to go, we also discover that such a way is a serendipity, a surprising revelation of life. Behind all these texts of Advent and Christmas is this note of hope and joy. As we look at the texts and themes we will see this paradox repeating itself over and over.

Advent I

“ . . . Something is trying to be born . . . ”

Mark’s admonition is to watch (Mark 13:32-37). Watch for what? For the Messiah to come. For the Christ to come again. But why? Because, if John is right (John 1:10), Jesus was not recognized the first time and there is every good chance we might miss Him again.

The people Mark was admonishing to watch were people in persecution, people whose temple had been destroyed and whose roots had been cut away. They were people who were feeling that when they needed Him most, Jesus was not there and was not returning as quickly as they hoped. The events of their lives were contradictory to the expectations of those who love God. But then again so were the experiences some 600 years earlier of the Jews in exile

(Isaiah 63:16-64:8). The lament of this text reflects their sense of abandonment, feeling God had deserted them and, yes, probably even led them into the sin and apostasy that characterized their state in exile.

Walter Brueggemann has noted that the text is bound by the affirmation that God is our Father (Isaiah 63:16,64:8). He suggests that these are the parameters of Advent and Christmas as well. We begin by knowing whose we are—God’s—and we learn that God has not abandoned us: we are children of this Parent whom we haven’t seen as much of as we might lately.

Watch, says Mark, watch for the One from whom we seem to be alienated. Watch, for the One will come, and, if we have been waiting and watching actively, praying, remembering through Sacrament and Word, and using our talents, then we will discover a God who is faithful, fulfills promises, and brings to us a newer and deeper sense of hope.

Henri Nouwen, in his book *The Way of the Heart*, has provided a rich insight which speaks to this text. Those who will discover in Christmas the God who works for us and comes to us in our need, most likely have already met God in their “solitude.”

The basic question is whether we ministers of Jesus Christ have not already been so deeply molded by the seductive powers of our dark world that we have become blind to our own and other people’s fatal state and have lost the power and the motivation to swim for our lives.⁵

If us, then what about the people of the pews? Nouwen advocates “solitude” which he calls the furnace of transformation. Drawing upon Jesus’ own temptation in the wilderness, he calls “solitude” “the place of the great struggle and the great encounter—the struggle against the companions of the false self, and the encounter with the loving God who offers himself as the substance of the new self.”⁶ Solitude, Nouwen says, is a place of conversion, where a new person emerges, an experience of coming to know deeply the God who re-creates and makes new.

Christmas is a season of personal and communal renewal. It’s for those who remember, as Isaiah remembered, God’s past action in the Exodus and therefore understand God’s cruciality for the critical times we live in. It’s a season which stirs people to embrace life without quitting, to hope in the face of all odds, and to watch.

As people look back over the story of their lives, tracing the hand of God present in grief and accomplishment, despair and joy, as they stand there, up to their knees in their past⁷ and they realize God’s grace has been at work even when they were sure God was absent, hope begins to be part of their consciousness and perspective. That is hope! Standing up to our knees in the past and straining, reaching, looking forward to the future. Watch, said Mark, for the One who has come and is coming again.

Advent II

“ . . . then the old is going to have to give way . . . ”

If Christmas is Jesus, then Advent is John the Baptist. A vigorous fighter against sin and injustice, there stands John in the ascetic tradition of Elijah thundering in the wilderness, that dangerous wasteland of fear and terror, that place of endless wandering of the tribes of Israel on their way home to the Promised Land, grumbling all the way, yet still protected by God. We hear the demand and judgment of his articulate, powerful preaching as he talks about an ax being laid to the roots of trees, the winnowing of the wheat and chaff, baptism with fire, and a call to repentance.

But John is a fascinating mixture of endings and beginnings, a classic display of something ending in order that something may be born. John is the epitome of the old age, the abrasive prophet yet the one who points to what is to come; the end of all that has gone before which we see as admirable if not adequate, yet the forerunner of what is to come.

The Old Testament passage complements and underlines the Gospel. As John represents a strong figure resisting the forces of the age, so the Jews in Babylon were exiles, as Brueggemann points out, because they refused to assimilate to the dominant culture; they refused to accept Babylon as home or to credit Babylonian authority.⁸ The text speaks with a consoling note as it deepens our perspective of hope. That the Jews suffered in exile as they have in endless generations goes without saying. The depth of that suffering may be insulated from us today by the distance of the past. It was deep and agonizing; the lives of children and women were lost, homes destroyed, and the beloved temple was in ashes—it was utter devastation! What was left? A hope that arises out of nowhere. As the birth of John and Isaac and Samuel to aged barren parents strikes us as impossible, so a hope that defies reason and reasonableness emerges. But then isn't that just like this God of surprises! A hope that brings homecoming to the fore. A hope that presents a God who gathers the broken and crushed into God's arms like a shepherd and will “carry them in His bosom and gently lead those that are with young” (Isaiah 40: 11).

The Israelites of the exile had to choose which word to believe, the empty promises of a repressive and old regime or the New King who bears us home. It is worthwhile to reflect on homecoming for us, what it means to be estranged and our refusal to admit to the false claims upon our lives.⁹ This in itself would be fertile ground for a rich proclamation of Christmas.

The crunch, however, is realizing how powerful and threatening the old is which has to give way. It is not something to be trifled with. The old is powerful because it is familiar; it is at hand and in hand, therefore all the more entrenched. The old grows out of a lifetime of growth and cultivation; it grows out of values and systems we have either bought into or been seduced by. The chilling image of a Herod slaughtering the little boy children because he heard of a threat to his throne is a powerful metaphor of the danger of the old. We may well be, as many have suggested, in a time of decline and ending in North America today. Nothing is more dangerous than nations and individuals who are “losing it,” and refuse to admit it. They tend to do extreme things. Walter

Brueggemann expressed it powerfully in these words:

The church's ministry is not only prophetic, to note the ending, but also pastoral to embrace the ending, for with our fading historical position of dominance we may have as much to grieve about as does Rachel [see Jeremiah 31:15]. Surely songs are to be sung about new children to the barren one. Initially, however, the loss, the grief, and the barrenness must be faced fully, and we may not be very skillful (see Amos 5:16) or willing to face them (Amos 6:6). Our propensity is to deny, cover up and supersede the loss.¹⁰

If the old is going to have to give way it is surely going to be traumatic and will require all the pastoral sensitivity possible.

Advent III

“ . . . there is agony in the process . . . ”

I wonder if the people of Nazareth ever reconsidered their reaction to Jesus after He read to them portions of the Old Testament lesson, Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11, and then they ran Him out of town. No doubt they had heard the lesson many times over, but whether it was because it was read to them by a “son” of the congregation, or whether it was his temerity to suggest that what the text said applied to them, they soon found themselves reacting in strong anger. There was agony for them. The text is a text of action, political action at that, unheard by our society because although it has been read over and over again its impact has not yet dawned on us because it has either been rejected out of hand as irrelevant, or it is not listened to because perhaps we sense the agony it will cause for us.

The more we get into the Advent texts, the more we discover they are not a lead in to the birth of a helpless little baby, but the anticipation that some radical changes will come to pass one day which will be agonizing for all affected and life will never be the same. Purely and simply, these texts talk of transformation, restoration, inversion—things which are unsettling and threatening to all of us who are comfortable and secure in our ways. Threatening as they are, they compel us to listen because we sense that the justice and force underlying them is one of love, care, compassion, sensitivity, and above all Grace. It boggles the mind to try and comprehend an economic society built on these texts, yet it's their thrust in a clear-cut call for justice that we need to hear.

The critical point, however, is that this is the work of the Spirit, the “Force” which creates a new creation, radically transforming the past. Amidst the agony hope is deepened. The Spirit brings hope where all seems hopeless, and this is a thought we need to ponder in relationship to the impact of reversal and transformation on our culture and society. It is precisely because of the Spirit that possibility arises amidst impossibility.

A fresh, though thoroughly shattering look at Mary's song is taken by Robert McAfee Brown in his book *Unexpected News*. He has chosen to look at

a number of Biblical texts through Third World eyes where the issues of justice and poverty are far more keenly felt. He notes how in her song she sings about the lowly being lifted up and the powerful and high brought down. Like Isaiah 61, he notes how very political her song is, something that seldom surfaces as we hear it read in our world. He contends that "Mary's song cuts through" our separation of religion and politics, "just as the son she is carrying will do later on, challenging the Herods and the Caesars . . ." ¹¹ Then he brings it all into sharp focus as he clearly reiterates the unexpected, surprising news of God who has plans for God's world.

This God pays attention to the poor, the oppressed, the enslaved. You are looking for a Saviour? Don't look to the royal courts, look among the slaves. Don't look to the capital city, Jerusalem, look to the boondocks, Nazareth. ¹²

At the heart of these texts is the issue that cannot be ignored—the restructuring of society so that the poor take their rightful place in God's world. There surely is agony in the process, for those waiting and those who will be brought down.

Advent IV

" . . . as well as joy . . . "

By now we have traversed the great themes of history from the Exodus and Exile to the hope-creating, surprising Incarnation of Jesus who fits no preconceived notions yet comes with compassion and grace. He is born, not to aged parents like Abraham and Sarah, Hannah and Elkanah, Elizabeth and Zechariah, but to a young woman just betrothed. He comes not as the result of human achievement but of the action of the Holy Spirit. He is born to a woman who was as surprised as anyone at the news from Gabriel. Mary wasn't particularly "religious" like Hannah, praying, pleading, begging God for a son and promising to turn him over to God once born. This is an announcement out of the blue so to speak, not a reward for piety, devotion, or goodness. Eduard Schweizer in his commentary on Luke crystallizes the issue:

Mary experiences what took place when the Spirit caused the world to arise out of chaos and life out of dried bones. It has nothing to do with her virtue or her nature nor with the active procreative will of Joseph. The presence of God overshadows Mary just as the cloud of God overshadowed the tent of meeting. ¹³

"The virgin birth of Jesus is depictive of the new Creation, the first result of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the latter days," ¹⁴ and this leads us to focus not on the virgin birth but on its author, the God who always surprises us with Grace, power, and freedom to move outside expected and conventional modes. It is when we realize that what we thought was hopeless takes place that we realize we are not dealing with ordinary, understandable things.

The spirit of God comes to us as to David generations ago. David who built a house for himself first—a magnificent one at that!—then decided God shouldn't live in such humble quarters. God comes to David whose own past

was no model for young children growing up, and says, "No, I don't want a house. I will be free to be who I am. I will be free to go where I will, but you will have a dynasty forever. You will have a home, a great name. Your people will have a home." Out of nowhere comes this amazing "Covenant." Out of nowhere come Mary and Joseph and Jesus. Out of nowhere comes the Spirit that made all things new.

So we come to the hushed moment when after the agony of childbirth new life breaks into the world. That in and of itself is cause for wonder and awe. The Incarnation, the unexpected breaking of God into our world in terms that shakes everything loose from its foundations, is cause for fear and trembling and then joy. For preacher and parishioner alike to catch but a glimpse of this in the season of Christmas is to set us on a journey where nothing again will ever be the same.

If there is nothing else there is the re-emergence of hope into a culture where hope is fading and distant. But of course there is more. As we explore the fears of the people and our own too, as we reflect upon the darkness that surrounds so much of people's lives, as we remember the lonely and depressed at Christmas time, we realize that those powerful and stirring texts we have been looking at over the four weeks of Advent now come into the full focus of fulfillment at Christmas. The hope emerges as we realize that as God has dealt graciously and surprisingly with people over the full sweep of history, so God will remember them in their need.

I remember a man of my congregation who was facing certain death. The illness had come upon him quickly, and he was afraid. He felt there was something wrong with being afraid, that his faith was not strong enough for the crisis before him. We talked about the fears expressed so powerfully in the Psalms; we remembered the promises to the people of Israel through enslavement in Egypt and the long years of wandering in the wilderness dependent only upon God. We recalled the agony of Christ in the garden and His sense of abandonment on the cross. We realized that despite all the experiences to the contrary God fulfills his promises. He was tired after our talk, but he lay back on his bed, closed his eyes, and slept.

The place we discover the liberating joy and hope of Christmas may not be in the candlelit drama of the Christmas Eve service, or amidst the joyous family atmosphere of Christmas morning. It could be on the bed of pain, in the room where the curtains are drawn shutting out the world in anger and loneliness, in the soup kitchen where love comes to one who hasn't been able to "celebrate" Christmas for years, wherever someone discovers that the hope and justice they felt they'd never see breaks in upon them and they are free.

NOTES

¹ See Fred B. Craddock in *Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year B*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), and Elizabeth Achtemeier, "Preaching For Advent/Christmas" in *Preaching as Theology and Art*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984).

² Walter Brueggemann, *Hope within History*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), p. 5.

³ Walter Brueggemann, "Advent Christmas" in *Proclamation 3, Series B*, Elizabeth Achtemeier, ed., (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 25.

⁴ Frederick Buechner, "The Annunciation," *The Magnificent Defeat*, (New York: The Sea-

bury Press, 1968), p. 62.

⁵ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1981), p. 21.

⁶ Ibid., p. 26.

⁷ Frederick Buechner, *A Room Called Remember*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 11.

⁸ Brueggemann, "Advent Christmas," p. 16.

⁹ Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Hope within History*, p. 106.

¹¹ Robert McAfee Brown, "Mary's Song—Whom Do We Hear?", *Unexpected News*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), p. 77.

¹² Ibid., p. 78.

¹³ Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Luke*, (Atlanta: The John Knox Press), p. 29.

¹⁴ Alan Richardson, *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament*, (London: SCM Press, 1961), p. 174.