

# *Disruptive Hope: New Testament Texts for Advent*

Charles B. Cousar

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

During the fall term of 2000, a group of five international scholars, two pastors, and a faculty convenor, met at Columbia Seminary to address the issue of the mission of the church in the twenty-first century. They talked, worshiped, read, and wrote papers.<sup>1</sup> In describing “the spiritual condition of humankind at the outset of the twenty-first century,” they identified *despair* as the pervasive mood of the day—not only for the have-nots of our culture, but also for the haves.

Despair? Initially it seemed an unusual analysis of the more affluent in our society, particularly those who had reaped the benefits of an unparalleled economic growth. Pride, self-reliance, perhaps; but despair? Then I remembered that the contemporary drug of choice is still Prozac. Later I caught the end of a Katie Couric interview on the *Today* show. She was speaking with a woman who had done research and had written a book on the personal situation of young executives—both male and female—who were clearly on the rise in their businesses and corporations. I heard enough to learn that the researcher had found those executives’ lives to be chaotic and out of control. Frequently, she found, their marriages were coming apart at the seams; family life was dysfunctional. Everything was sacrificed to the job. At the end of the interview, in describing the mood of the young executives, the writer used the word “despair.” Rather than finding fulfillment in their jobs, their drivenness had left them hopeless.

Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart undergird this notion when they begin their book *Hope Against Hope* by detailing the failure of secular eschatologies. On the one hand, there is Modernism, whose dominant myth has been the notion of historical progress. It had its roots in the European Enlightenment of the late eighteenth century, and throughout the nineteenth century the idea was connected with developments in science and technology. Nature was forced into serving human needs. Human wants and desires for material goods were potentially unlimited, making economic growth a major imperative of western civilization. Belief in the inevitability of progress was a kind of faith in the process of history itself, replacing the Christian view of providence. Sure, there were historical setbacks, but they were no more than “the eggs broken to make the utopian omelet.”<sup>2</sup>

But then came the horrors of the twentieth century—two world wars, the Holocaust, Vietnam, the killing fields of Cambodia, the ethnic cleansings in eastern Europe, the tribal brutality in central Africa, not to mention the decimation of AIDS and the violence done to the environment. The notion of moral progress became a sick joke; maybe better to say moral regress.

Postmodernism has not helped much either. As Bauckham and Hart contend, it exposes the illusions of modernity, but its suspicion of meta-narratives hardly provides a solution. There is no grand story to interpret reality. And without one, priority is given to the present, not the future. The future becomes no more than a short-term prolongation of the present, as government think tanks and technological wizards plan and control what is coming. The future is no longer the sphere of the unpredictable and the unexpected, but simply more of the present. Humans have little to hope for,

certainly nothing new to anticipate. As the title of a recent television program about the Internet age put it, “The future just happened.”

The word “despair” means literally the negation of hope. With the have-nots, who have bucked the system long enough, it is an unavoidable reality. They simply do not have the luxury of repression. With the haves, however, a pervasive hopelessness sets in when, despite their prosperity, the structure of meaning is frayed and fading. Insatiable consumerism, the idolatry of the body, and the passion for acquisition serve as guises to hide the dark face of despair.

The Advent season is about hope—hope rooted in what God has already done in Jesus Christ and hope for the completion of God’s purposes in the world. The assigned texts provide the occasion to speak to the underlying mood of despair. They, however, refuse to let us talk about hope glibly or to offer only a shallow optimism. They do not allow us to speak of a human heroism that struggles on, despite the immense obstacles that lie in the way. Moreover, the texts are remarkably free of romance and may leave congregations longing for the poinsettias of Christmas and asking, “Why don’t we sing the traditional carols during December?” The texts instead point us to the second and first comings of Jesus and inquire about our readiness, our welcome of outsiders, our need to repent, and our patience in waiting. They are realistic words about hope that, for many, will disrupt the orderliness of life.

### *The First Sunday in Advent*

The two lessons from the New Testament direct our attention to Jesus’ second advent. The Gospel lesson comes from the apocalyptic discourse of Jesus in Matthew 24, precipitated by a twofold question of the disciples regarding the temple and regarding the signs of Jesus’ coming, which is equated with “the end of the age” (24:3). Since the temple would have been destroyed by the time this Gospel was written, the focus throughout the chapter falls on eschatological matters.

Two repetitive motifs dominate the passage (Matt. 24:36-44). One is the expression “the coming (*parousia*) of the Son of Man” (24:27, 39, 44; cf. 24:27). The language derives from Dan. 7:13-14 (cf. 24:30) and was no doubt cherished in the early church. The Son of Man whom the disciples knew, who had nowhere to lay his head (8:20), who was accused of being a drunkard and a friend of tax collectors and sinners (11:19), who came not to be served but to serve (20:28), and whose service involved betrayal, suffering, and death (17:12, 22-23), would finally receive the glory and honor due him. His return would mean the consummation of God’s purposes and the universal, public vindication of the gospel. This is cause not for fear but for celebration.

The other expression repeated often in the text is that no one, not even Jesus himself, knows the time of his coming (24:36, 39, 42, 43). Four examples are cited: Noah’s cohorts, two women working the field, two other women grinding meal, and the house-owner whose house is broken into. None of these people is accused of doing anything wrong, not even Noah’s companions. The point is not accusation, but that, despite the many signs previously given, all remain in the dark as to when the Son of Man comes.

The result of not knowing is that all the fantastic speculations (like *The Late, Great Planet Earth*) and the novelistic (like the *Left Behind* series) and cinematic spin-offs (like *Apocalypse*) are immediately and finally deconstructed. But more than that, the text speaks of living in a constant state of alert. I take that to mean openness to the God

who confronts us daily with calls and blessings. If there is any doubt as to what readiness entails, the story of the faithful and wise servant, immediately following the assigned text, provides a model. He is “at work,” doing what his master has directed him to do (24:45-46). He is doing nothing special; he is simply being faithful. Or one can read on in Matthew’s narrative to the climax of this apocalyptic sermon, where Jesus speaks of those who were surprised at the final judgment. They were simply doing their duty—feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick and imprisoned (25:15-16).

The epistolary lesson for the first Sunday in Advent speaks of hope as the coming of “salvation” (Rom. 13:11-14). Interestingly, the passage is located in a slice of Romans in which Paul writes about the practical character of the new life in Christ. In the midst of considering the proper exercise of gifts in the church (12:3-8), the appropriate attitude toward opposition (12:14-21), the responsibilities Christians have toward the civil authorities (13:1-7), and the questions over whether or not a believer must be a vegetarian or a sabbatarian or a teetotaler (14:1-15:6), Paul writes, “*In all this, remember how critical the moment is*” (13:11, NEB). The present is a time of eager expectation. “Salvation is nearer than when we first believed.”

The imagery is vivid. Upon arising, one rubs her eyes to face the daylight. It is time to get up and shake off the effects of the night. But the dawn for believers also brings with it the sounds of warfare. We dress for battle, but with unusual gear, called “the armor of light” (13:12). In fact, Jesus himself is the armor we wear. As Dorothy Day put it, we fight with “the weapons of mercy.” Rather than escapist language, the imagery reminds us of the struggles against the principalities and powers, against injustice and oppression.

It is not easy to speak of the second advent from the pulpit, and especially difficult when the minds of the congregation are preoccupied with preparations for Christmas. And yet it is precisely the first coming that forces us to think about the second. Matthew’s readers are told to be ready for his second advent. But they also read the words of Jesus that depict his presence, not his absence. When two or three are gathered in his name, Jesus will be in the midst of them (18:20). Further, they are promised that “I am with you always, to the close of the age” (28:20). The one who is coming is the one who is present already. It is not a strange, unknown, or absent Jesus they expect to meet at his second advent.

Then what is so distinctive about Jesus’ “return”? Hendrikus Berkhof contends that “the new element will be the publicity and the glory.”<sup>3</sup> God-with-us is currently hidden under imperfection and strife. The presence of the new creation is known only amidst the old, where our sight is blurred and our experiences are highly ambiguous. But we anticipate a time when God will reveal the new humanity as it was intended to be, when no one can deny the gracious lordship of Christ, and when creation will be thoroughly renewed—a good reason to hope.

### *The Second Sunday in Advent*

The lectionary simply will not let us get to Christmas without facing John the Baptist (Matt. 3:1-12). Each year he turns up in the Gospel lesson for the second Sunday. His preparatory word is unequivocal: “Repent, for the rule of God has come near!” And Matthew, by describing in detail his dress and diet and his firebrand preaching in the wilderness, makes John to be a cartoon character. Barbara Brown

Taylor appropriately calls him “the Doberman pinscher of the gospel,” God’s “watchdog who makes sure no one wanders into holy precincts unaware.”<sup>4</sup>

What is intriguing about the passage in Matthew is the presence of Pharisees and Sadducees among the crowd that had come out from Jerusalem to hear him. One could perhaps understand the attraction of John for the common folk who were longing for renewal and a fresh start. But what were the religious authorities doing there? Could it be that they were flirting with John’s radical call for change? Could they have wanted a little bit of repentance, but not too much—just enough to clear the conscience and to feel good about themselves again?

John directs his attack directly at them. He goes after their privileged position as Abraham’s heirs. “You brood of snakes! Who warned you about the divine wrath that is coming?” There can be no “little bit of repentance.” It has to do not only with forgiveness of past sins that may haunt us and from which we would welcome release. It also has to do with a new and changed life for the future, a way of living fitting for the new day. John offers people a fresh start, not simply a rearranging of the past to make it less painful.

But the Pharisees and Sadducees also hear John’s word of witness. He not only makes demands; he prepares the way for Jesus’ appearance. Beyond the call to repentance, the point of John’s preaching and baptism is to ready God’s people for the coming one who will baptize “with the Spirit and with fire.” I take these last two phrases to refer to God’s work in purifying and refining the covenant people (Mal. 3:2-3; Zech. 13:9). What a way to get ready for Christmas!

Romans 15:4-13, the epistolary lesson for the Sunday, may seem to have an unusual beginning point, but, as assigned, it begins and ends with hope. The scriptures are written to evoke steadfastness and hope (15:4), and the concluding benediction is prayer for hope (15:13). In both cases, hope is the gift of God.

In the middle of the passage comes the critical mandate, “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you for the glory of God” (15:7). Paul is likely writing no longer about the strong and the weak in the church, but about Jews and Christians. *Proslambano*, a strong verb meaning to “receive or accept into one’s society, into one’s home or circle of friends,” connotes more than merely tolerating or indulging a person with his or her ethnic features; it entails accepting, giving space for, respecting the distinctiveness of the other.<sup>5</sup> Mutual acceptance of Jews and Christians becomes one of the implications of the long and involved argument of Romans, a reality at the heart of the Gospel and an important theme for Christmas. Fittingly, the paragraph concludes with Paul’s memorable blessing, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 15:13). Hope is experienced in a transformed community.

### *The Third Sunday in Advent*

Now we find John the Baptist in prison. Only later in Matthew’s narrative do we discover that his incarceration is due to his denunciation of the philandering Herod (14:1-5). Often John’s doubts about Jesus are explained psychologically—that he lies depressed and forgotten in jail and that his lonely plight creates in his mind an uncertainty about Jesus. How else could this vigorous denouncer of the religious leaders and this baptizer of Jesus end up doubting the Messiah? But the text suggests a difference explanation: “When John heard *what the Messiah was doing*,” he sent his

disciples to query him.

In truth, Jesus wasn't the sort of Messiah-figure even John the Baptist was anticipating. He does not sound like one who is laying the axe to the root of the trees and who is setting fire to the barren limbs. Jesus responds by describing what he is doing in the words of Isaiah (29:18-19; 35:5-6; 61:1). He may not bring fire down on the heads of the religious authorities or take the sword against Roman might, but his words and deeds are the acts of the Messiah (and in the end turn out to be threatening to both religious authorities and Roman might). The new age is expressing itself in Jesus in such a way as to drive out the debilitating forces of the old age and to bring life out of death. But nothing of the thunder and lightning of John's preaching; only the gentle rains of healing and of declaring the good news to the poor. What John does not perceive is that Jesus' messiahship will eventually evoke the same response from the leaders of power, as his own thunderous preaching did.

Jesus praises John for his ministry. He is confirmed as the special messenger who has prepared the way for the coming One. His importance as harbinger of the new age remains, even though he has difficulty recognizing its presence when it comes.

When one thinks of eschatological themes in the New Testament, one does not naturally think of James. The name of Jesus occurs only twice in the letter, and any sense of eschatological urgency is missing. And yet in the epistolary lesson for this Sunday, three times an eschatological expression occurs (James 5:7, 8, 9). Readiness for Jesus' coming is not the theme, but patience in times of suffering. If the Judge is at the door, then one can be sure that right will prevail and that the evil oppressors, described in 5:1-6, will be overcome. Three figures highlight the depiction of patience: the farmer who awaits nature's work with his crops; the prophets who spoke the divine word and had to accept abuse; and (just outside our lesson) Job, whose endurance is well known. Each waits with patience for justification and vindication.

Meanwhile, the besetting sin of oppressed people is the bickering and grumbling that can divide the body. Difficult times can dissipate energies and fray nerves to the point that the oppressed are as bad off as the oppressors. Readers are warned, therefore, that they, too, are subject to the judgment of the coming Judge. Hope and judgement are not mutually exclusive; in fact, hope without judgment is empty.

### *The Fourth Sunday in Advent*

Two features of Matthew 1:18-25 immediately grab the reader's attention. First are the names given this child of Mary—Jesus, the name given by God's messenger, and Emmanuel, derived from the Hebrew scriptures (Isa. 7:14). Both names then have divine warrant and clue the reader to the significance of the one who is to be the protagonist of the forthcoming narrative.

It is the second obvious feature of the passage that may seem for us moderns most troubling, though its presence in the story is undeniable. Matthew wants to make it unmistakably clear that Jesus' birth resulted from a virginal conception. Four times he says it (cf. 1:18, 20, 23, 25). In Matthew's narrative Jesus was not the product of a sexual relationship between Joseph and Mary, but he was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

Why is this virginal conception so critical to the story? Perhaps because it interrupts the ordinary world and confronts the reader with the strange otherness of God's intervention. Nothing normal or natural about the birth of this baby! It stretches our credulity to the breaking point. Bauckham and Hart comment,

When God acts through his Spirit to introduce signs and anticipations of his promised salvation into this world there can only be anomaly and surprise, for the two orders do not neatly fit together. The ordinary is rendered untidy by the occurrence of that which does not belong in its midst; and fear and incredulity are perfectly natural responses to all this. How can this be? Surely this is impossible, outrageous, unnatural?<sup>6</sup>

Jesus' extraordinary birth is but the beginning of the disruption of this world by God's intervention. In between birth and resurrection, we are repeatedly reminded that God's reign and human structures of power do not easily mesh. Religious and political authorities are shocked time and again, until they give him a scandalous death. The story only culminates in the words of other messengers who speak to two women coming to grieve in a graveyard, "He is not here; he is risen" (Matt. 28:6). From beginning to end, it is an account of a strange and odd intervention of God in human life. The story invites a hope that is bound to be "impossible, outrageous, unnatural."

Paul expresses this disruptive feature of the gospel in the introduction to his letter to the Romans (1:1-7). He cites what is likely a common christological formula about Jesus, who from a human point of view is David's descendant, yet is declared by the Spirit to be God's Son in power (Rom. 1:3-4). The response to such a gospel is extraordinary—"to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles" (1:6). Today it seems muted and proper, because *we* are "all the Gentiles." It was not, however, so in Paul's day. His mission beyond the accepted religious community brought opposition of various sorts. Why should God reach across the boundaries established by the law to embrace the outsiders? Because it is God's nature to do so. And God still reaches across set and sometimes sacred boundaries "to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles."

These texts for the Fourth Sunday suggest that any hope that can address today's despair must be capable of imagining and articulating God's present and future as something different from what one reads about in the morning newspaper or hears about on the evening news broadcast. Instead of construing the world as a place of limitations in which there is just so much to go around, what if we thought of our resources in terms of God's boundless generosity? What, if instead of thinking of limited boundaries, we focus on the Center from which the circle emanates? It might make for a more interesting Christmas.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The papers of the seminar have appeared as a book entitled *Hope for the World: Mission in a Global Context*, ed. Walter Brueggemann (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001). The emphasis on despair comes strongly in a chapter by Douglas John Hall, one of the members of the seminar. Hall's chapter is the first essay in this issue of the *Journal*.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, *Hope Against Hope: Christian Eschatology at the Turn of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Hendrikus Berkhof, *Well-Founded Hope* (Richmond: John Knox, 1969), 41.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 22.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Christian Literature*, rev., trans. Frederick Danker and Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 717.

<sup>6</sup> Bauckham and Hart, 101.