

Advent and Eschatology

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This Advent will find the preacher again looking at the lectionary texts and wondering how to use them without sounding like a Left Behind survivor or trying to preach the text away rather than deal with it. Advent is more than an ecclesiastical way of counting the shopping days to Christmas: it is in its own right the time when we are presented with texts about the Second Coming of Christ and other equally unusual passages.

The new liturgical year really picks up where the last one ended. The last Sunday of the year is Christ the King, and the traditional passage in the old lectionary was always Matthew 25:31-46, the last judgment, with Christ as judge, and the separation of the sheep and the goats. That still remains in Year A, though other lessons are now used for B and C. The theme remains, however. Advent itself then begins with more emphasis on Christ's return.

Why This Is Helpful

There is some logic to this arrangement; we live in a society that tends to romanticize Christmas, dwelling on the babe in the manger, forgetting that we stand this side of that event, and we know who this child is. He is the Risen One, who "sits at the right hand of the Father." He is the one through whom all things have been created and redeemed. Remembering this just before we enter the Christmas celebration adds to the mystery and astonishing reality of the incarnation. Preaching on the Second Coming is not an intrusion of an alien topic but rather a necessary focus in Advent so that we can really appreciate the message of Christmas.

In addition, there is great danger that in trying to avoid apocalyptic misunderstandings the absolutely necessary eschatological character of the gospel will also be neglected. That is to say, we may disagree with the clear timetable of contemporary apocalyptic views, but Christianity necessarily looks to an end of our present history and the fulfillment of the promises that God has given: that there actually will be a time and a place where there will be justice and righteousness, where the meek shall indeed inherit the earth and swords shall be turned into plowshares. Jesus was not simply teaching us how to live but actually inaugurating the beginning of the time when these things will happen. He is the redeemer of history. His cross and resurrection are the gateway to that new creation. This is the one whose birth we celebrate. Christmas is a new beginning—even the beginning of the end—but it is not the end. Nor is the beginning repeated every December. That first Christmas, whose date is hidden in obscurity, was the unrepeatable initiation of this redemption long promised and prepared for by the prophets of Israel. We cannot celebrate Christmas properly without looking forward to this glorious promised future.

Two Streams of Texts

These are good reasons for choosing the more apocalyptic texts as the basis for the sermons in Advent. However, it is possible to avoid them, and the temptation is great.

The lessons for the Sundays in Advent, after the First Sunday, seem to follow two paths at the same time: one is the greater stress on the return of Christ and judgment; the other is a narrative leading to the birth of Jesus: John the Baptist, the Annunciation to Mary, Joseph's dream, and so forth. These vary somewhat from year to year, but the general outline is there. In some ways it would be easier to follow this narrative path. At the same time, it is worth seeing if both emphases can be combined.

There is also the wider context of the service itself, especially if an Advent wreath is used. Though there is no consensus as to the meaning emphasized by each candle, often the narrative texts from the Gospel lesson are used as a basis, so the candles may represent John the Baptist, the Annunciation, etc. Therefore it may be easier to follow the narrative track of lessons as the basis for preaching. In planning the whole service, some coordination needs to be worked out so the various parts of the service flow together smoothly.

The Issue of Judgment

Much of apocalyptic literature stresses the fearful judgment that is to come: Christ returns as the judge who separates the sheep and the goats; his return is like a thief in the night; who can endure the day of his coming?

Judgment is a theme that runs throughout the Bible. There is a Marcionite tendency in many of our congregations that thinks all judgment is the province of the Old Testament, and the New Testament deals only with love and forgiveness. The church historically has viewed that as a serious error. There is love and forgiveness, the experience of God's grace and mercy, throughout the history of Israel. And, as the pericopes for Advent show, there is stress on judgment in the Gospel itself. Yet in the midst of that judgment, there is no sense that Christians are to be fearful.

Luther greatly helped the church understand why judgment is a hopeful and not a fearful event. For him, the awareness of justification implies that believers know that judgment has been rendered already, and they have been found innocent. However, in a loving response to that word of salvation from God, believers willingly open their lives to God's scrutiny so that they may become the people God created them to be. This is the process of sanctification. In other words, Christians willingly undergo judgment now, within the context of faith that God the Judge is also God the Redeemer. There is no fear of later judgment. Believers have avoided the rush of the Last Days, whenever they occur. To the degree that the old life of sin continues in them, judgment is voluntarily undergone now. To the degree that they participate in the new life in Christ, they live already on the other side of the Day of Judgment. Therefore, the birth of Christ is the beginning in history of this final judgment. For believers, it is a gracious judgment on their old lives. For nonbelievers, that judgment may be postponed; but it will come.

The Lectionary

With this in mind, let us look at the passages listed for this Advent, Year B, but with a glance at parallel passages in the other years.

The Sunday before Advent, Christ the King, the passages will have been from Year A, and therefore the Matthew passage on the Final Judgment. The First Sunday of Advent uses as the Gospel lesson the Little Apocalypse from Mark (13:24-37): The Son of Man will come in glory and gather the elect, though no one knows the day or

hour, so stay awake so that you will not be asleep when the Master returns. The Old Testament lesson is Isaiah 64:1-9: the lament of God's people who have grown away from God and sinned, and now pray for God to forgive and return to them. The same theme is repeated in the assigned Psalm, 80:1-7,17-19. The Epistle lesson is I Corinthians 1:3-9: the saints await the revealing of Christ, who strengthens them even now so they will be blameless on the day of the Lord.

With all of these passages in mind, the preacher can clearly point out that we do not know when Christ will return, and in fact, Jesus tells us not to be concerned about that. We are to live all our lives under God's judgment, but voluntarily, unafraid, because we know who our judge is—the one who came at that first Christmas, and who died and rose again for our salvation. So these days of Advent should be a renewal of our commitment to be open to God's judgment so that we will be prepared at all times to face Christ unashamed.

That does not mean being perfect, but it does mean seeking to grow daily toward the life God intends for us. Such an emphasis could restore judgment to its proper place in the Christian life: a joyful part of the process of sanctification. The prophet and the psalmist echo prayers that God would indeed intervene in the wayward life of the world, where even the people of God have gone astray, and bring judgment so that there can be renewal. Christmas is God's ultimate answer to that prayer. Christians can use both the words of the prophet and the psalmist as their own prayer that God would free them from the sin that continues to be active in their lives.

The Second Sunday brings in John the Baptist (Mark 1:1-8). He is identified as the one promised to prepare the way for the way of the Lord. He does this by baptizing those who confess their sins. He says that the one who comes after him is more powerful and will baptize with the Spirit.

The Old Testament lesson is Isaiah 40:1-11, the promise of comfort to God's people, and also the promise that God will come to be the shepherd of the flock. So there is a reinforcement of the idea that God is coming into our history.

The Epistle lesson is 2 Peter: 3:8-15a: a very interesting passage that deals with the question of why the promised end has not yet come. A new heaven and earth have been promised, but we still live in a sinful world that has not changed. The response is that God is patient, and is giving humanity time to repent and change their ways before the judgment comes. We therefore ought to live holy lives while we await the new heavens and earth "where righteousness is at home." The obvious corollary is that righteousness is not at home in the world in which we live. It is a fallen world, and therefore those who live even now under God's judgment will also not be at home in this world.

There is a parallel between Israel's waiting for the coming of God to be their shepherd and comforter and the church's waiting for the return of Christ. In both cases, what is awaited is a world in which righteousness abounds.

The Third Sunday continues with the story of John the Baptist. Since Mark's Gospel has very little of this narrative, there is a switch to John's Gospel and its account. (In years A and C, in both Matthew and Luke, the stress on judgment in John's preaching is very strong.)

The Old Testament lesson, Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, brings joyful words of the servant who has been called to bring the announcement the day of the Lord, a time of judgment and redemption. In Advent this obviously refers to the birth of Christ; but in the context

of the rest of Advent, the Day of the Lord is also ahead of us, at the end of history. This is evident in the epistle lesson, I Thessalonians 5:16-24, where the faithful are urged to hold fast to what is good and be blameless at the coming of Jesus Christ. The Psalm, 126, also points to the time of restoration, when God will do great things for God's people.

What is clear in both the Second and Third Sundays is that if we were to use only the Gospel lessons as the basis for sermons, the whole focus could be on the first coming of Christ. Even the Old Testament lessons could be understood to point only to this. However, the epistle lessons make clear that Christmas is only the beginning—and we who know the message of Christmas also know that there is more to come, that all the promises have not yet been fulfilled, and the time that we have now is a time for growing in holiness, so that we will not be ashamed, but be blameless when he appears.

The Fourth Sunday of Advent turns from judgment to the joyful news of the Incarnation. The Old Testament passage is 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16, where God informs David, through the prophet Nathan, that he, David, will not build God a house, but God will build David's house, and that his throne will be established forever. In Year B, the Gospel lesson is from Luke: the words of annunciation to Mary (Luke 1:26-38). The lectionary also permits using the Magnificat (Luke 1:47-55) as the psalm for the day. If not, Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26 is suggested. It promises God's faithfulness to the restored king on the throne of David. The epistle lesson is Romans 16:25-27: the gospel that Paul has preached "is the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed"—and the disclosure is in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, whose birth we are about to celebrate. It is a mystery that is not ended by its revelation. That is, it is not like a mystery that once we know "who did it" the mystery is ended. This mystery remains a mystery, an astonishing act of God that no amount of knowledge or understanding will ever comprehend. God's plan for the redemption of the world was hidden for long ages, but now is revealed. That is what we celebrate at Christmas.

Planning

If the preacher plans the sermons beginning with Christ the King Sunday, then the First Sunday of Advent can stress the meaning of judgment for Christians, and how it ties into the preparation for Christmas. There can also be a reinforcement of the idea that we do not need to speculate about the timing of Christ's return, and in fact, we are told not to. The Second Sunday can help contemporary Christians deal with the same question their ancient counterparts also asked: If Christ has come to bring judgment on evil, why is the world no better now than it was? It also is a time when the congregation can be reminded that there is an eschatological element to the faith that must not be forgotten. This can easily be related to John's message.

The Third Sunday is a time when the comparison between the first and second coming of Christ can be dealt with very specifically, helping the people understand what it is we celebrate at Christmas and what yet remains to be celebrated. The preparation for Christmas is really almost over at this point, since the Fourth Sunday links much more directly with the celebration of Christmas itself.

On the First Sunday it is almost impossible to avoid the apocalyptic element. The Second and Third really need to link the epistle lessons with the rest in order to

emphasize the needed eschatological character of the season.

The Fourth Sunday points to the fulfillment of God's promise to establish the throne of David eternally, and the child of Mary will carry that out. It will not be a throne like others, with successors that follow as each king dies. This king will be eternal, once the cross is past, and the kingdom will also be eternal. It is that kingdom we are a part of, and yet it is not yet fully revealed, and will not be until the king returns in all his glory.

It is possible for Christians to realize the significance of Christ's return, and the judgment involved in it, and not be swept up in all the oddities of current fiction. In fact, it may well be that precisely because many pastors have avoided the topics so much that books like the *Left Behind* series have had an appeal: they speak to something that is important to the Gospel, even if they do it in a strange way. Solid preaching on these issues should make these books less attractive. Total avoidance of the issues will not.

The church has placed such concerns in the Advent season, and therefore we would do well to use the time to deal with these concerns. If we do, we may rediscover traditional Advent hymns and prayers that already have made these connections. We need to remember that the church placed emphasis on the return of Christ at the season because it makes our Christmas celebration more authentic. It is our task to see that this happens.