

*Preaching the Advent Texts*¹

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I.

The Middle of Time: Luke

In Advent time gets all mixed up. There is the confusion between “secular” time and ecclesiastical time. Are we waiting for an incarnation or counting the shopping days till Christmas? There is the odd temporal mix of two “comings” of our Lord, the humble coming at Bethlehem and the triumphal arrival yet to come.

But there is also the complicated way the lectionary sets our Gospel lections. Obviously when Luke wanted to tell Jesus’ story he wrote Luke 1, and then Luke 3:1-6, and then Luke 3:7-18, and then Luke 21:25-36. But in the lectionary we get Luke 21 first, then the two Luke 3 passages in reverse order, and then the Luke 1. While it may be comforting theologically to know that the last is first and the first last, exegetically it poses a problem. The trick for the preacher is to be able to move thematically through Advent without losing Luke’s chronology altogether. Some attention to the larger context of the Gospel will enrich the preaching of each particular Advent Gospel text.

For many years now there has been a general consensus among professional New Testament scholars that Luke, of all the Gospel writers, is most like a traditional historian, which is to say that he is most concerned with the nature of “time.” The most influential study of the nature of time and history in Luke’s Gospel is Hans Conzelmann’s *The Theology of St. Luke*.² The original title of the book, in German, was *Die Mitte Der Zeit*, which means “The Middle of Time.” Conzelmann’s argument was that for Luke the story of Jesus is the story of the “middle of time.” The beginning of time is the era of the prophets; the time in which Luke writes is the era of the church; and there, right in the middle at the turning point of history is the story of Jesus, his life and death and resurrection. As we look at the way time functions in these Advent texts we rely heavily on Conzelmann’s insights—with the important reminder that for Luke, as for the other synoptic writers—the faithful also wait for the time beyond time, the consummation of history in the eschaton.

Luke 21:25-36

Advent preaching begins with the end of the human story. In Luke 21:25-36, Jesus warns the apostles about that end. Part of the challenge of preaching at Advent is precisely to talk with our congregations about end times. It’s a challenge in part because both church and secular culture are focused now on Jesus’ first coming and it still always comes as a shock to some in the congregation that Advent celebrates two comings and not just one. But it is a challenge also because most of us have very little idea what to do with the apocalyptic themes in the New Testament. “Mainline” Christians simply note that apocalyptic is puzzling. Other Christians think they have got the solution to the puzzle, and they write best selling books telling us when the end time prophecies will be fulfilled—almost always soon.

The problem is that the Gospel writers also thought that the time was coming very

soon, and in every generation from the first until now both honest and sleazy prophets have arisen to say: “Here it comes.” Yet we cannot simply ignore apocalyptic literature. Even those of us who are most skeptical of timetables can learn from this text two major claims of apocalyptic. First, the end of time is in God’s hands. Second, the history leading up to the end of times is in God’s hands. The verses that precede our text talk about tangible historical signs of God’s presence, not just spectacular post-historical signs. God is in the business of dealing with Jerusalem and with armies, and with pregnant women and with captivity and with release. To ignore the apocalyptic signs in Scripture is to diminish much of Scripture’s meaning and its—still puzzling—power.

Our text also gives us three further clues on the understanding of apocalyptic. First, by pointing to the fig tree, Jesus tells us that one appropriate way to understand eschatology is to do so parabolically, metaphorically. Don’t just look at the newspaper; look at images like fig trees, mustard seeds. Like all good images, they help us understand how God works without pinning God down to a literal timetable.

Second, as in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus here “demythologizes” his own claim. By the time Luke writes his gospel it is already clear that many of the original generation of believers has passed away before the end of all things. So Jesus interprets his own prophecy: to say that this generation will not pass away means primarily that the testimony of this generation will not pass away. The words they heard from Jesus and their testimony to those words endure till the end of time.

Third, Jesus reminds us of the ethical “cash value” of apocalyptic prophecy. What counts is not so much how accurately we predict the future but how faithfully and watchfully we live in the present. For the Christian, every season is Advent, every day anticipation, every moment crisis, every time the right time to be alert.

Luke 3:1-6

If we want to follow Hans Conzelmann’s understanding of time in Luke’s Gospel, we now go from the beginning of the end (Luke 21), to the end of the beginning (Luke 3). For Conzelmann, John the Baptist is the consummation of the age that points to Jesus—the last and greatest of the prophets.

One thing is certain: all four of our Gospels agree there is no way to get to Jesus without going through John the Baptist, and the lectionary in all three cycles reminds us there is no way to preach Advent without preaching John the Baptist. There is no way to understand John the Baptist or his cousin Jesus without knowing that their lives and ministries and losses and triumphs took part, not in Bible land, but in “real” time—the tough, complicated secular world where Tiberius was the emperor and Pontius Pilate was governor and the corrupt Herodians were puppet kings of the imperial power. And there is no way to understand John the Baptist without understanding the history in which he stands—sacred time—the history of God’s dealing with Israel. The popular distinction between the Old Testament God and the New Testament God simply falls apart when we read the gospels carefully. One can only understand John the Baptist in the light of Isaiah’s prophecy. John is the prophesied prophet. He both fulfills and proclaims.

What he fulfills and proclaims is the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. We cannot begin to follow Jesus unless we undertake the repentance—the change of mind and life—that comes with John the Baptist.

The end of the beginning drives us forward to the beginning of the end, and in the middle of time, Jesus.

Luke 3:7-18

Perhaps the most striking verse in this passage is the evangelist's conclusion: "With many other exhortations he proclaimed the good news to the people" (v. 18). The "good news" we have heard seems to consist of frightening judgment in the first and third paragraphs and difficult demands in the second paragraph. In comments and sermons through the years, William Muehl has suggested that good news needs to include the good news that what we do makes a difference.³ If anything goes, nothing matters. If nothing matters, we do not matter. The fact that God in Christ comes in judgment as well as in mercy reminds us that what we do makes a difference to God, and that God is in charge of history and of our lives in the midst of history.

What is more, the difficult demands in Luke 3:10-14 are unusually "good" for the gospels because they actually seem attainable. We are not told to give up everything, but if we have two coats to give one to the needy and to share our food. Tax collectors aren't told to get out of the tax collecting business, but to do their jobs fairly. And soldiers aren't called to pacifism, but to refrain from abusing their power in dealing with civilians. How one squares these tough but relatively modest demands with the immodest demands of the Sermon on the Plain soon to follow (in Luke's Gospel if not in the lectionary) is a matter for some reflection and perhaps some preaching. Given Luke's overall project, it is almost certainly *not* the case that John presents a first step in faithfulness and Jesus a second step for the super-faithful.

As Advent moves toward Christmas, and as John's time edges into Jesus' time, we will soon be officially allowed to sing the carol "In the Bleak Midwinter." Some of us have probably been humming it for weeks. The last stanza includes these words: "What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb. If I were a wise man, I would do my part. Yet what can I give him? Give my heart."⁴

The story of John the Baptist expands this theme. What we bring to the newborn Jesus is a repentant heart: we turn from the strategies of selfishness to welcome the child in love and our neighbor in justice and compassion.

Luke 1:39-55

On the last Sunday of Advent, especially when that day is also Christmas Eve, it is time to announce the meaning of what we have been waiting for.

What we have been waiting for is time fulfilled and time turned upside down.

We have been waiting for time to be fulfilled. The promise to Elizabeth that she will bear a child, though she is old, has been fulfilled. The promise to Mary that she will bear a child, though she has not had intercourse with a man, has been fulfilled. The promise to Zechariah that his son will point to Jesus is fulfilled in that wonderful moment when the baby John greets the baby Jesus by leaping in the womb.

Time fulfilled is also time turned upside down. Mary sings about what God will do using the past tense, turning prophecy from wish into promise. Now, in the middle of time, God moves time toward its consummation. "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." "Yes," we say, or "yes," we hope. And also, "Please, not yet." Most of us in our churches on the last Sunday of Advent will be

relatively powerful, relatively rich, and altogether full. We know that the Magnificat is not only a promise for us, it is a promise against us.

We proclaim what we hope for and fear: that the coming of the Messiah is the beginning of the Messianic age. We listen for what the rest of the Gospel of Luke will tell us. We are called to serve a cause larger than ourselves, a justice that may necessarily be more just to others than to us. We enter into the adventure of a new time, begun but not yet fulfilled, which will be God's time, and then the world's time, and then—because we, too are children of time and of the world—our time, too.

II.

Before the Middle of Time: The Prophets

Most of us will center our preaching on Luke during the four Sundays of Advent and on Christmas day as well. The Old Testament lessons help because if Luke portrays the center of time, the Hebrew Bible shows us the time that prefigures that center.

Jeremiah 33:14-16

One of the peculiarities of time seen from a Christian perspective is that we read prophecy in the light of its fulfillment. We sometimes read time backwards instead of forwards. When the prophet spoke of the “coming days,” he was almost certainly not looking ahead centuries to the birth of Jesus but ahead a few years to a new, righteous dynasty on the throne of David. Christians, looking back, claim that the rich meaning of that promise can be seen only in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Indeed, for Luke, who writes after the fall of Jerusalem, even the prophecy of Jeremiah 33:16 is fulfilled, not in the city, but in the man. It is not Jerusalem who becomes “The Lord is Our Righteousness,” but Jesus himself. Taken with Luke 21:25-36, this passage recalls us to the double focus of our Advent expectation. We wait for the fullness of time, as in Luke, but we also wait for the coming of the true Davidic king, as in Jeremiah. We read the times of prophecy in the light of the times of fulfillment.

Malachi 3:1-4⁵

In like manner also we read Malachi's promise of a messenger of judgment looking back from the future, in the light of the judgment we see in John the Baptist. (Mark makes this connection explicit in Mark 1:2.) We do not know for sure what messenger Malachi has in mind, though the name “Malachi” is translated “my messenger,” and it may be that the prophet is himself the messenger of whom the oracle speaks. The rigorous cleansing and refining that Malachi predicts reflects his hope for a newly refined levitical priesthood to lead in the worship in the temple.

In any case, the passage helps us see the way in which John the Baptist in our New Testament passage is the link between the time of prophecy and fulfillment. In one sense, he is the messenger Malachi has predicted. In another sense, John as messenger himself points ahead to Jesus who will claim the God's temple in Luke's Gospel and who is like a refiner's fire. Jesus comes to cleanse not only the priesthood but the whole community of believers, indeed the whole world. John is the fulfillment of prophecy, and the final prophet, both. “Time past and time present...”

Zephaniah 3:14-20

The Advent texts play off against each other in surprising ways. On this third Sunday of Advent, we have New Testament judgment and Old Testament grace. Could one preach a sermon that moved from the judgment in John to the promise in Zephaniah? The final great assurance of Zephaniah is certainly a psalm of Advent hope: “At that time I will bring you home.” William Brown makes the exegetical and homiletical point: “Home is a destination as well as a direction. God is our home, and homesick is what we are.”⁶

Micah 5:2-5a

It is perhaps a little odd to use this text in Year C of the lectionary. We would expect it in Year A. Luke may or may not have this text in mind when he writes his birth narratives, but Matthew certainly does. (See Matthew 2:6.) At any rate, whether or not Luke saw connections between Jesus’ birth and Micah’s prophecy, we can see how Micah’s time points to Jesus’ time.

Again here God’s time and human time come together in striking ways. Micah speaks in his present time of what God will do in some future time, and yet that future time is entirely rooted in the past. Micah predicts a ruler “whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.” The reference to the past and to Bethlehem, David’s town, surely suggests that the King Micah foresees will inherit the power and the promise of David. Whether or not Luke remembers Micah’s oracle, he stands in his own present time. He looks back to see David and the prophets looking ahead. He looks back a few years to the whole story of Mary’s Magnificat and Jesus’ birth and ministry. Through the words of Jesus, he looks ahead to an even fuller consummation of that Kingdom which led from David through Micah to John the Baptist to Mary to Jesus to the end of time. Furthermore, the images of the passage point us toward Jesus’ own story. Jesus, the Messiah, fulfills the promise when “she who is in labor has brought forth” (5:3). Jesus (more in John’s Gospel than in Luke’s) “shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord” (5:4).

III.

After the Middle of Time: The Apostles

Paul and the author of Hebrews help us further to see how Jesus, whose story Luke tells, is Lord in the ongoing life of the post-resurrection communities.

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Writing after Jesus’ first coming in Galilee, Paul anticipates Jesus’ second coming in glory. As with Luke 21, the question is not just what (and whom) we wait for, but how we live in the meantime. In Luke, Jesus tells the apostles, and through the apostles the church, to “Be alert at all times” (Luke 21:36). Paul specifies the responsibilities of waiting somewhat differently: “May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you” (1 Thess 3:12). Perhaps one good test of faithful eschatological expectation is whether it increases or diminishes love. Do we wait in hope of the world’s redemption or in hope of our enemy’s defeat? The whole passage is steeped in joy—joy not just because of what God does in Jesus Christ, but joy because of what God does in the church: that community that is called to sustain each other and all the saints.

Philippians 1:3-11

Again Paul returns to the theme we saw in Thessalonians. How do we live in the light of our expectation? John the Baptist calls us to repentance and to faithful behavior. The first verses of Philippians spell out again what faithful behavior looks like: “And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight, to help you determine what is best”(Phil 1:9-10).

During a period of crisis in the church and the society, a distinguished ethics professor finished his lecture only to hear a student’s plaint: “Sir, you are so cerebral and the issues are so visceral.” Yet Paul here reminds us that real love requires real thought. Sometimes in the light of Christ’s advent and in awaiting God’s triumph we are most faithful by being most careful. Sometimes church is not just the place for proclamation but for difficult and even controversial conversation.

Philippians 4:4-7

We live in the meantime, between Christ’s first advent and the consummation that will come in Christ at the end. The question is, how do we live eschatologically even while we still go to work, pay the bills, raise the children, and attend church meetings? John the Baptist gives some answers in today’s Gospel lesson.

Paul’s list sounds simpler, but in fact it is theologically just as rich. To say that God is in charge of history, to say that Christ will come again, is to say that Christ is always near. If Christ is always near, what do we do?

We rejoice. For God in Christ is near enough to touch every life. We pray, not dutifully, but gladly, because God in Christ is near enough to hear every prayer. And we trust in the word that is not simply a hope but a promise. In the meantime, in between times, “The peace of God which surpasses all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

Hebrews 10:5-10

The problem with preaching Hebrews alongside another text (especially so rich a text as the Magnificat) is that the language and thought world of the Epistle is unique in the New Testament, and it takes at least half a sermon to place the text in context.

Nonetheless, for any brave preacher who wants to take on Hebrews 10 for Advent, this, too, is a passage on the distinction between time present and time past—a distinction made on the basis of a reading of Psalm 40. Time past is the time of priests and sacrifices. Time present is Christ’s time: his body, his sacrifice, replaces all the sacrifices of ages past. His time becomes our time.

And, as all of Hebrews will argue, the present time when Christ redeems us through the sacrifice of his body opens us to that future time when we all receive “a kingdom that cannot be shaken” (Heb 12:28).

In different ways, all our Advent passages remind us of the oddity of Christian time. Christ is the center of time: the prophets lead to him: the apostles lead from him. Prophets and apostles—all the saints—await him.

Notes

1. Thanks to Professor Robert Wilson and those who participated with us in the summer seminar on these texts at Yale Divinity School in June 2006.

2. Trans. Geoffrey Buswell (New York: Harper & Row, 1961).
3. See especially William Muehl, *Why Preach? Why Listen?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).
4. Christina Rosetti.
5. For helpful background on Malachi, Zephaniah, and Micah, see William P. Brown, *Obadiah through Malachi*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1996).
6. Brown, 117.