

# *Hold the Chicken Soup: Preaching Advent Hope*

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The numbers are in: chicken soup sells and sells. No, not the kind your grandmother used to prescribe for the flu (although sales are brisk in that market, too), but the kind packaged in the now over five dozen paperbacks in Jack Canfield and company's enormously successful *Chicken Soup for the Soul* book series. Within days of the 1993 release of Canfield's first volume, *Chicken Soup for the Soul: 101 Stories to Open the Heart and Rekindle the Spirit*, "chicken soup" stories began to be heard from many pulpits.<sup>1</sup> If the homiletical aim was to send the congregation out with portable, can-do optimism to fortify them for whatever might be awaiting them at home or office, preachers from the first-semester homiletics student to the seasoned pulpit veteran could be heard serving up one or another of Canfield's catch-in-the-throat stories of human courage, insight, and kindness. Preachers who swear by these tales admit that a dose of Canfield's brand of chicken soup may not save anyone, but it can get a lot of them through a week.

The warm, regular-folks-next-door stories of unexpected human kindness, persistence, and uncanny timing that find their way into Canfield's books are chosen from hundreds sent in by *Chicken Soup* fans. Those that make the cut are carefully selected for particular target audiences. In addition to six volumes of basic "chicken soup" stories, there are now multiple volumes of custom-brewed Christian chicken soup, as well as collections for the African-American, Latino, Jewish, Canadian, and Latter-Day Saint soul. Other volumes target the golfer, the gardener, the cat- and dog-lover and the NASCAR fan.

If reader testimonials are any indication, Canfield's brand of chicken soup indeed brings relief to many souls. The lonely and the addicted, the incarcerated and the unemployed, and kids as well as adults who wrestle with mental or physical health challenges testify that the touching stories Canfield packs into his books have given them the one thing that has made their hardships endurable: hope.

God knows our congregations need hope. In the Advent season, preachers grope for compelling ways to preach hope. Rightly, they struggle to evoke hope not merely as an intellectual idea, but a palpable experience. They know that folks will stumble into the pews on those pre-Christmas Sundays straining to live up to burdensome expectations to produce a Christmas to end all, while secretly they harbor fears about job security and retirement savings, fret over college tuition, and in more cases than anyone might imagine, fight off depression. Others come feeling worn down by night after night of evening newscasts where the cameras pan across once serene Near Eastern cityscapes being thrashed into rubble by bombs and rocket fire, while in silent commentary, erratic oil prices and stock market numbers stream across the bottom of the TV screen. Many preachers face congregations whose lives and livelihoods have been reduced to heaps of mildewed ruin by hurricane and flood. If folks like these have managed to make it to church on a pre-Christmas Sunday morning, the least we can offer is a believable message of hope.

Unlike the hundreds of stories in the Canfield books, the texts of Advent do not,

on the whole, serve up hope in pure and portable forms. Hope in many Advent texts comes indigestibly packaged with other ingredients—warnings of judgment, fearful visions of cosmic upheaval, and a pervading sense of apocalyptic emergency. Faced with biblical texts where hope seems to flicker like a desert mirage on a distant eschatological horizon, what preacher would not be tempted to cut to a cozy, hearth-and-home story? Certainly, if it is such a story a busy Advent preacher seeks, Canfield's tales can be counted on to deliver uncomplicated, hearty helpings of optimism and happy endings that anyone can readily digest.

Of course, preachers may be heartened to find that at least some of the texts for this Advent season, Cycle C of the New Revised Common Lectionary, appear to serve up hope more generously than in some years. The reading from 1 Thessalonians for Advent I lets us overhear a pastor giving thanks for a faithful, hardworking congregation. The first six verses of Luke 3 for Advent II brim with hope and promise, framing John the Baptist's ministry with a lengthy quote from Isaiah ("every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low....and all flesh shall see the salvation of God," Luke 3:5-6). Two lyric prophetic visions are offered for Advent III; and who could ask for a more soul-stirring text for Advent IV than Philippians 4:4-8 ("if there is any excellence, anything worthy of praise, think about these things," v. 8)?

Perhaps it is possible to cut and paste this Advent season, using texts selectively so as to slice out of the photo anything that would disturb the serenely hope-filled horizon. A more honest approach, however, will be to allow these hope-inspiring texts to be heard within the context of the other readings for each day. The Gospel reading for the first week of Advent from the middle of Luke 21 announces, "your redemption is drawing near" (v. 28)—but only amid catastrophic upheaval in space and sea. An honest reading of the 1 Thessalonians 3 text reveals, as New Testament scholar Beverly Gaventa points out, that missing from the recital of the familiar triad of virtues (faith, hope, and love) is *hope*, indicating that perhaps this congregation, for all its faith and love, is laboring as do many of our congregations under conditions that are sapping their hope.<sup>2</sup> On Advent III, the lyrical visions of restoration from Zephaniah and Isaiah play against John the Baptist's grating prophetic denunciation of the crowds who come to him for baptism. In Matthew, the epithet "brood of vipers" is reserved for the Sadducees and Pharisees, but in Luke 3 John applies it to all, accusing both the humble and the haughty of religious presumptuousness. Israel's hope, the Messiah, draws near, says John—but with pitchfork and fire, prepared to commit the unworthy to the flames. The fourth Sunday of Advent focuses on Mary—alarmingly young, arguably the first disciple, and so unflappably open to God's taking up residence in her that we cannot help wanting to see this thing through with her, full term. Yet we can be pretty sure that her visit to cousin Elizabeth's house was no casual social call, but a way of lying low until the death-threats back in her home town settled down. Welcoming God's future can get you killed. And while her beloved song celebrates full bellies and dignity for the poor, she envisions, as well, the humiliation of the rich.

The hope that Advent announces always stands in uneasy proximity with visions of ultimate judgment and warnings of doom. By contrast, stories that work along the lines of the "chicken soup" genre portray (sometimes in a "surprise" ending) straightforward, unambiguous hope. Canfield's stories feature individuals facing some kind of crisis—illness, lost objects, missed opportunities, or painful misunderstandings. Yet the ending is always happy—unambiguously happy. Even in stories where a loved

one dies, it is a “good” death. Memorable last words are exchanged, and even tragically brief lives are complete. There is closure.

Yet, in much human experience, closure eludes us. Suffering does not lead to triumph, or, for that matter, even to great insight. In his book, *Suffering and Hope: the Biblical Vision and the Human Predicament*, Christiaan Beker suggests there are two kinds of suffering, the kind that urges us forward, and the kind that immobilizes us. Some kinds of suffering, Beker argues, test and challenge us, but nonetheless “stimulate our hope,” because they involve difficulties to which we can rise, physically and emotionally and spiritually, through endurance and effort.<sup>3</sup> We can identify resources inside ourselves or readily at hand to help us meet the challenge. Against great odds, we endure and perhaps even triumph. Not surprisingly, this is the kind of suffering in view in many of the stories in Canfield’s books. While certainly genuine and in many cases indeed very trying, it is suffering from which one can imagine emerging with something akin to grace or even heroism.

What does *not* figure into the Canfield stories is another kind of suffering of which Beker speaks. There is suffering, says Beker, that “no longer stimulates hope but evaporates it.”<sup>4</sup> This suffering (such as the suffering that Beker and other prisoners experienced in forced labor camps during World War II) defies our attempts to reflect philosophically or theologically about it; at best, someone may attempt to describe it, and then fall silent, for they know they have not begun to convey its terror, its attendant violations, its capacity to induce despair. Marilyn McCord Adams speaks of the human toll of this kind of suffering as “horror.” Adams defines “horrors” as experiences so devastating that they strip the human being of the capacity to make meaning.<sup>5</sup> Horrors blast the landscape clean of those moral or spiritual landmarks by which one might navigate toward a glimmer of insight or reconciliation.

Some may find the stories in Canfield’s *Chicken Soup* books and others of the same genre encouraging when what they need is a reminder that human beings are capable of unexpected kindness, that insight can come through trial, and that there may be reasons for optimism in even in bleak, sad, and difficult circumstances. But something more than optimistic tales of individual triumph is required in the face of the sort of extreme, meaning-defeating suffering that writers like Beker and Adams have in mind.

It is this kind of suffering—suffering that strips the sufferer of the capacity to make sense or construct a believable future—to which Christian hope must answer. In the face of true horrors, sprightly optimism about human nature and its resilience will not do, argues John Macquarrie. Genuine Christian hope can be neither derived from nor reduced to optimism:

Optimism, whether it is an illicit generalization from theories of evolution or whether it depends on a humanistic doctrine of progress or whether it is derived from a simplistic religious belief that God orders everything for the best, is a philosophy that misses the ambiguity of the world, and fails to consider seriously its evil and negative features.<sup>6</sup>

The Bible does not trade in optimism, insists Christiaan Beker. In the New Testament, “the wrong that suffering causes to the individual is not answered in a way that is commensurate with the often unbearable costs that present suffering inflicts on

the sufferer.”<sup>7</sup> In most New Testament contexts, we are not encouraged to hope that our suffering will be compensated in the sense that all that we have suffered will pay off in a measure of comfort and prosperity commensurate with the pain and dispossession we have suffered—or at the very least, in the form of increased wisdom and insight. Instead of encouragement, what the Scriptures do give us is the bold, contrary rhetoric of promise juxtaposed against an almost unrelenting record of very real loss, pain, fear, doubt, and despair that mirrors the worst of the human condition. According to the testimony of the biblical tradition, God promises against the backdrop of despair a future that is new-created in justice and righteousness.

Christian hope that depends on experience-defying divine promise can seem vulnerable indeed. The evidence for it is slim-to-none. In fact, the hardest evidence we will get for God’s promised future is the Church’s testimony to the crucified and risen Christ, God-with-us in the first Advent and God-coming-toward-us in the future. Such hope cannot be shored up by any accumulation of evidence for the triumph of the human spirit, since that is not what it is about. But it is just such vulnerable hope that we find in the texts of Advent—fragile, ambiguous, contrary to experience. Yet such promissory hope is the only kind of hope worth speaking of in the presence of despair and meaning-destroying horrors.

All of this being said, might Canfield’s unambiguously hopeful stories still claim a place in Advent preaching? Might we, for example, pair a “chicken soup” story with an Advent text—say, John the Baptist’s berating of the crowds at the Jordan—and thereby “counterbalance” the ambiguity of the hope these troubling Advent texts offer, tipping the scales a bit in a more reassuring direction? My answer is “no.” What makes stories of the “chicken soup” genre an inadequate analogue for biblical, Advent hope is their tidiness, their lack of ambiguity. In “chicken soup” stories, the human spirit proves indefatigable. Such stories lack the capacity to address the kind of suffering that pushes the human spirit beyond that limit where it is possible to cobble together meaning out of the blasted mental, emotional, and spiritual landscape of experience. In addition, because “chicken soup” stories are, by and large, strictly stories of individuals and families, they run the risk of luring us into escapism disguised as hope. If the horizon of crisis is always on the individual level, we can avoid focusing on the appalling sufferings of whole classes, races, and nations, or the systemic evils that cause such sufferings. We can end up soothing ourselves with the fraudulent belief that there are no trials so great that individual grit, ingenuity, and endurance cannot find a way. When the horizon of suffering has been narrowed to the manageable, the nature of hope will be trivialized.

Macquarrie, quoting Roger Gregor Smith, writes, “‘[T]he great anonymous host of sufferers....are a cloud of witnesses who point the finger of scorn upon all the neat and tidy optimisms which try to sweep all this accumulation of suffering under the carpet and offer us a tidy scheme.’”<sup>8</sup> Christian hope must somehow take seriously the tragically anonymous hosts buried or swept away by hurricane, tsunami, earthquake, and war.

If there is a worthy analogue to Christian hope to be lifted up at Advent, perhaps it is baptism. The turned-around, ending-as-beginning logic of Advent hope is the logic of baptism as well. In baptism, God starts with us at the end. In baptism, everything we might have counted on to keep us afloat, including (especially) our own capacity for goodness—even our faith in human nature—is surrendered to a watery

death. We pass through death with Jesus, and rise up with nothing left to us but a life anchored in the promise and hope of resurrection. This hope sustains the one claimed by God, whether she encounters in her life the surprising human kindness, courage, and insight of which Canfield's stories speak, or the mind-blasting suffering to which Beker and Adams point.

Notably, daring proclamation of genuinely Christian hope that is rooted in the will of God to make all things new has long been heard in African-American pulpits. Many African-American preachers have drunk deeply from the well of their people's suffering, but have drunk deeply, as well, from the wells of biblical hope—the kind of hope envisioned in Advent texts. Such preaching pairs testimony to the presence of the promising God with a thoroughly realistic, locally credible assessment of the depth of suffering and the pockmarked record of human moral response to the suffering of other human beings.

It is no surprise that many preachers look elsewhere than the Bible in the Advent season for stories that can simply, straightforwardly, inspire hope. Without a doubt, stories of the “chicken soup” genre have the advantage of being not only believable but genuine. Furthermore, with the publication of volumes aimed particularly at African-American or Latino readers, preachers can be more confident about finding stories that resonate with non-Euro-American listeners. Yet my advice to Advent preachers is to “hold the chicken soup.” It is not that Canfield's stories or others with a similarly simple, trouble-to-triumph plot are not worth telling. Human beings will always preserve and share stories of remarkable courage and kindness. But they are not deep enough, ambiguous enough, or large enough to carry Advent hope.

The hope our burdened congregants need this Advent season is the hope that comes as stark, unexpected divine promise. Despite the undeniably massive and dismal failures of compassion and courage with which human history is littered, despite hurricane and flood, present sorrows and fears about the future, Advent preaching proclaims: “Fear not, your God comes to you.” In Advent, we remember how God's promise was handed over to us in the flesh-and-blood babe of the manger, from a source entirely outside and beyond us. This promise and the hope it ignites throws its claim forward over our uncertain present, filled though it is with constant slippage, fear, and regret, and illuminates a horizon where justice prevails. In Advent, we trust all we are, as well as all we have failed to be, all the surprising moments of grace we have known or will, as well as all the ways that life has failed us, to the burning brightness of God's coming.

## Notes

1. Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen, *Chicken Soup for the Soul: 101 Stories to Open the Heart and Rekindle the Spirit* (Deerfield Beach, Fla.: Health Communications, Inc. 1993).
2. Beverly Gaventa, *Interpretation: First and Second Thessalonians* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 45.
3. J. Christiaan Beker, *Suffering and Hope: The Biblical Vision and the Human Predicament*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmanns, 1994), 25-6.
4. *Ibid.*, 26.
5. Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), 28.
6. John Macquarrie, *Christian Hope* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 13.
7. Beker, 118.
8. Macquarrie, 13.