

Preaching the Advent Texts

Lindsay P. Armstrong,
First Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, GA

Hope is in the air these days as everyone from politicians to economists, from doctors to inventors promise better days, bigger bank accounts, and brighter futures. Despair is in the wind as well, tentatively held at bay by frantic busyness, lowered expectations, and the rhetoric of muscular optimism. Inviting us out of this whirlwind of desire and anguish, Advent comes, and once again, we are invited to find our bearings.

We are pushed not to rush to the manger, but to name the locus of our true problems and hope. In Advent, we examine ourselves, our world, and God, as best we can. We look back in time, seeing a world that is deeply flawed and profoundly good, a place God has repeatedly entered in order to redeem. We are asked to do the hard work of understanding the present and seeing a world that aches but also echoes with the sounds of God at work. We imagine and prepare for a future, knowing that what we have now is undoubtedly good, but insufficiently good, and that God will return as promised, bringing new heaven and new earth.

Advent means “coming” or “arrival” and it is a time to nurture robust Christian hope and address a few skills, disciplines, and qualities of character needed to grow in faith, hope and love of God. We join Mary, Isaiah, the Psalmist, and countless others in daring to hope that God is indeed near. We let focused Christian hope shape our activity, and we listen to the calls coming through the lectionary texts of Advent for lives lived in particular ways.

This season I, like Mary and Joseph, hope to see a miracle. Like the angels, I wish to bring glad tidings. Like the shepherds, I hope to be welcomed in spite of poverty. Like the wise men, I want to be lured into journey and awed into silence and reverence. I hope to instinctively bow my head and bend my knee. Yet, in Advent we prepare. We name and practice the disciplines Christian hope requires, gifts such as prudence, patience, honesty, and humility that Christian hope both requires and brings.

1st Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; I Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

As the holidays approach each year, a game of tug of war begins in our home. It's a small but passionately fought tug of war game, with my young daughter on one side, relentlessly begging to open just one Christmas present early. On the other side, her parents pull back, dutifully replying, “Not a chance.” “Pleeeeeease?” Her green eyes are wide, and her face is flushed from the exertion of pulling on our heart strings. “No,” we respond, tugging back. With very little effort, her face begins turning as red as her fiery hair as she pleads, offering up every imaginable argument. We remain unmoved. (At least, I do. My husband has been known to switch teams.) And throughout Advent, as her desire for a particular toy or two deepens, the pleading and heartfelt cajoling repeats itself here and there, more robustly as the time draws near.

Truth be told, I envy her passion. As her parents, we will continue teaching her to faithfully direct her desires, carefully considering what she allows to take hold in her mind and heart. Yet, as the season affects all of us and faint whispers of hope echo amidst the thundering chaos of the season, what hopes grow within you? What is it you desire? What are our best desires? And what does it mean for us that our deepest and our best yearnings do not always match?

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,” cries the prophet Isaiah (64:1), candidly, if not desperately begging for God to return with the kind of power and splendor Israel saw at Sinai when God came down and the mountains quaked (64:1-4). “Stir up your might, and come to save us,” shouts the Psalmist (80:2). “Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved” (80:19). These yearnings for God to come in power and might, ushering in a new heaven and earth are among the most well-placed hopes that we who live in a world of wounded and misconstrued desire can hold on to. Scripture tells of the day when swords will be beaten into plowshares, lion and lamb will nap together in fertile fields, the meek will inherit the earth, the Son of Man will return in the same way he was seen ascending into heaven, and at the name of Jesus, every knee will bend...and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Yet, many generations have passed away, and the Son of Man has yet to be seen “coming in clouds with great power and glory” (Mk. 13:26). Wars rage. Children starve. Hatred grows. Indifference spreads. Desperation contorts. Instead of the heavens being ripped wide open, we know more about our hearts tearing as the promises of God hover just out of reach, offered yet not accomplished, promised yet not fulfilled. On the first Sunday of Advent, barely have we shaken off the overindulgence of Thanksgiving dinner when we are incited to indulge hope in an era when many simply try to “patch over the despairs of the day with high-flung rhetoric or overreaching promises.”¹ Barely have we begun resting in the shorter days and longer nights of the approaching winter when we are once again given a spiritual en garde and instructed to “keep awake” (Mark 13:35, 37), so that we might “see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory” (Mk. 13:26). An internal tug of war rages as riotously as a war played out on an international stage. We fight to keep hoping, anticipating, believing in God’s promises and even putting our belief into action. We retreat, heaving sighs of desperation, suspecting God’s promises to be distant if not illusory, and despairing, lowering our sights to more manageable hopes. “Keep awake!” urges Mark. It may very well be that he knows the “faux-cynicism which creeps into our souls, not because we’ve decided to give up, but because we need something to inoculate ourselves against the pain of swinging between illusory hope and transient despondency.”²

Fortunately, tuning our desires toward that which is best provides inoculation against despair as well as the most satisfying feast for the soul. “Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee,” prayed St. Augustine. As Advent begins, we may not need to muster the most muscular optimism we can manage. Experiencing hope as optimism usually inspires only short-lived transformation anyway. Instead, knowing that “we are the clay and you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand” (Is. 64:8), we can accept the tensions of who we are without inflating our self-importance or deflating our self-worth. As flawed and perfected, hopeless and

hopeful, so close to God and yet so distant, we can also let Christ be born anew in us, as the One for whom we have long waited, as the One who is our heart's desire. In Jesus Christ, the membrane between heaven and earth has indeed been ruptured, and God has come down, but not simply to heal our divisions and bring a new heaven and earth. Instead, God has come to share his very self with us in the person of Jesus Christ. Unlike the innkeeper, we know who knocks at our doors, waiting to come in. Our best desires involve inviting God in and getting to know God, such as we are able, never letting the benefits of God eclipse the person of God in Christ Jesus, as if what God does for us is more important than who God is. In order to "keep awake" (Mk. 13:35, 37), to yearn, and to continue waiting for someone, we must love that person very much. Thanks be to God that even in the midst of tug of war within our lives, that love is not only possible, but is our highest purpose and joy.

2nd Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

Jesus sat in a garden. The Buddha sat under his tree. Muhammad sat still in a cave. And Gandhi, Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King brought sitting still to perfection as a powerful tool of social change. Yet, patience is not a popular virtue in a culture that prizes speed above all else. Speed (and not sex) reportedly sells more products. "What are you waiting for? Get going! Do something! Just do it!" are the popular refrains of the day. Waiting is seen as wasting time. Even western Christians who live lives shaped by hope have allowed awareness of the magnitude and scope of the world's problems to noxiously combine with a culture of instant gratification. Consequently, we want, if not need, change right now. While this may inspire us to partner with the right person, the right group, or the right agenda to change the world, inspiration drawn from a combination of awareness of tragedy and need for instant gratification eventually dwindles. It has stimulative power, but not staying power. It nudges passions, but does not nourish them. "It turns us into political manic-depressives, cycling wildly between establishing great plans to transform the world and despairing that the world will never change."³

"Patience," counsels the author of 2 Peter, "with the Lord one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like one day" (3:8). In other words, what makes us think all promises should be realized at this moment? You and I are too small to contain the solutions to the world's problems and are too implicated in those problems to think we are part of the solution and not part of the problem. Thus, "the Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance" (3:9). It is for our own sake that God's timing is as it is. There is much that needs to improve in our own lives, individually and corporately. Are we rightly prepared to see God face to face? Are we ready "to have everything that is done...disclosed" (3:10)? Are our hearts capable of welcoming the One for whom there is often no room?

Or, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer asks, are we accustomed to thinking of God coming so vulnerably and sweetly as at Christmas "that we have lost the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us"?⁴ Bonhoeffer continues,

We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us. The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for everyone who has a conscience. Only when we have felt the terror of the matter, can we recognize the incomparable kindness. God comes into the very midst of evil and of death, and judges the evil in us and in the world. And by judging us, God cleanses and sanctifies us, comes to us with grace and love.⁵

Patience, therefore. Far from being passivity that allows sitting back and letting others take care of problems, patience attends the world, seeing it as it is and acknowledging what it should be. Patience reflects faithfully enough on self to know who we are and who we will one day be. (This alone makes it difficult.) Patience insists on seeking God and knows God well enough to stand firmly on the promises that God offers, letting them work within before working beyond. There is much essential that happens as we wait, for patience, 2 Peter seems to say, invites us to let the promises of Christ take hold and start to grow, like a planted and fertilized seed. It gives ground on which to stand and proper place to duel fears. It is one of the skills needed to be found at peace (3:14).

Christian hope shapes our activity by encouraging patience. In fact, Henri Nouwen once argued that without patience, our expectant hope degenerates into wishful thinking. Perhaps Christians living in a fast society should grapple with the wisdom and salvation of patience. Isaiah and all of the prophets waited. John the Baptist waited. Zechariah, and Elizabeth waited. Simeon, Anna, Joseph and Mary waited, even as we “wait for new heavens and new earth” (3:13), “striving to be found at peace” (3:14) while “regarding the patience of our Lord as salvation.” (3:15)

3rd Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Ps. 126 or Lk 1:47-55; I Thess. 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

On the way to church a few weeks ago, I stepped outside my house, locked the door behind me, turned around, took two steps, and promptly fell right down the front stairs of my house. No, I wasn't injured. Yes, there were neighbors outside who saw the entire spectacle and laughed, since they know me best as an athlete returning from a soccer game, the YMCA, or even a morning run. To top it all off, I had just been explaining to my daughter that she is not yet ready to wear high-heeled shoes, since she is neither old enough nor steady enough on her feet.

As I lay in a messy heap at the bottom of the stairs with my hose ripped, a few dead leaves stuck in my hair, Earl Grey splashed down the front of my suit, the contents of my purse strewn over bushes, porch and steps alike, and my shocked family still gazing in astonished amusement, I realized that I actually feel like a klutz rather regularly. The difference is that I usually feel spiritually clumsy. There are days or even months when I know I do not pray as I should, read the Bible as I ought, or even hold my tongue as loving God, self, and neighbor demands. I look around at the immaculately dressed saints in my midst and feel how messy and spiritually uncoordinated I can be. I do not even drive my car in a manner

that consistently reflects the grace of God, let alone have the strength to “rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances...test everything; hold fast to what is good,” as I Thessalonians commands (5:16-18, 21). I truly would like to be “clothed with garments of salvation” (Is. 61:10) and would even settle for being able to better “bind up the broken-hearted, proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners” (Is. 61:1). I would be eternally grateful to better “comfort those who mourn.” (Is. 61:2).⁶

Yet, our hope has never been in our own ability to do these things. The best of our own efforts cannot accomplish such things perfectly, which is why we look to Jesus as “the perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:2). It is the Lord God who “will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations” (Is. 61:11). It is “the God of peace himself [who will] sanctify you entirely” (I Thess. 5:23). “The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this” (I Thess. 5:24). Like Mary, our reply is simple and humble: “Let it be with me according to your Word” (Lk. 1:38).

There are a great many people gathered in pews each week who know they do not belong. They are moral misfits, spiritual klutzes, and burned-out believers who have placed themselves on the true Gift-Giver’s Naughty List, assuming that despite the fact that none are perfect, they are somehow more lost, more errant, more doubt-filled than is acceptable. Accustomed to the world’s unforgiving laws of nature and survival of the fittest mentality, they are paralyzed with insecurity, guilt, self-doubt, and inadequacy, as if God demands perfect people and a perfect place to make his home. Yet, God took the incongruities of divinity and humanity and bound them together in Jesus Christ. And God placed him--his very self-- in a humble manger, recognizing our need to have him with us as well as our confusion at how to welcome the Holy One. Undoubtedly, the manger proclaims our poverty and our confusion in the presence of God; yet, God comes and fills with majesty whatever we have to offer, no matter how humble, messy, or common. Thus, we are free to focus on what we can do as we welcome God into our clumsy, imperfect lives (rejoice, pray, give thanks, abstain from evil, bring good news to the oppressed, etc.), living in holy expectation that God will do the rest. After all, the promise is true: “For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations” (Isaiah 61:11).

4th Sunday of Advent

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Ps. 89:1-4, 19-26 or Luke 1:47-55; Romans 16:25-27;
Luke 1:26-38

What amazes me is the ease with which Mary believes and welcomes that which God is doing in and through her. She listens to Gabriel’s strange greeting and perplexing proclamation, and then she has the audacity to believe that God has chosen her. She simply accepts that God is working in and through her and that she will be mother of the “Son of the Most High.”

As the testimony of scripture indicates, this is a radical departure from tradition. When encountering the news that God intends to work through him, Moses made a case that he could not possibly do it. After all, he was a wanted man. Plus, he couldn’t talk so good. Gideon said he and his people were too small

and weak. Isaiah argued that he wasn't righteous enough, that his fuse was too short, and that he couldn't keep his mouth shut and tongue under control. Jeremiah claimed he was too young – only a boy. Jonah didn't even bother responding; he just ran. Zechariah asked for a sign, but God not only forged ahead with the plans for John the Baptist's birth, but had Zechariah spend the remainder of Elizabeth's pregnancy unable to raise another question, let alone his voice. Mary simply believed that God chose her, and said, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (1:38). Evidently, God's plans were more important to Mary than her own.

We think a great deal these days about offering ourselves up to God. Over and over again, we commit our lives – everything we are and everything we have-- to God for God to use as God will. As Christmas draws near, we ponder in our hearts the questions of how we too can let Christ be born in us and Christ's light shine through us. Responding to the countless appeals, we give generously. Running all over town (or at least all over the internet), we strive to find the perfect gift for someone we love. Knowing we have been blessed, we think of how we can bless others, and we treat these last days of Advent as if they were about giving as opposed to receiving, as if Christmas is about being indebted or generous instead of being graced.

God chooses Mary and gives her the honor of servanthood and the gift of being a blessing not because of who she is and what she had to offer. In the Gospel according to Luke, barely a word is said about Mary; we know nothing of her character or credentials for service. God simply picks her because he picks her. "God chooses because God chooses. Mary does not earn or deserve the honor of becoming the mother of Jesus any more than would any other woman."⁷ In fact, very little of Advent or Christmas has anything to do with Mary or Joseph's power, generosity, giftedness, or station in life, let alone our own. "The biblical story is not one of virtue rewarded, or vice punished, but of the relentlessly unmerited nature of God's grace."⁸ The only thing we can do is receive it.

Of course, it is much easier to give than receive. In our socially disengaged society, we don't want the indebtedness that comes when receiving a gift from another. We are uneasy with people having too many claims on our lives. Furthermore, when we get right down to it, there is little that we truly need. As a result, we are better at giving. We would much rather give than receive, and it is satisfying to be the kind of person who does so. It is fulfilling to be one whose competence, power, giftedness, and kindness allows for generosity toward others. However, it is also a kind of arrogance that keeps us more adept at giving than receiving.⁹

The breath-taking story of the angel Gabriel coming to Mary to share the good news of God's plans for the world asks us to stand empty-handed and needy before God. While we would rather be the ones setting the world right, it reveals to us that our very lives are gifts. It is a story about receiving and reminds us that we "get" long before we give. It blesses us by stripping us of pretense. It starkly but elegantly paints us as humble as we really are – more like Mary than we can imagine, and at our best when we reply, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Notes

1. I am gratefully indebted to Mark Alan Douglas's witty words and profound insights on the nature of Christian hope that are found in an as yet unpublished manuscript form.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Coming of Jesus in Our Midst," from *A Testament to Freedom, The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), 185.
5. Ibid.
6. For broader discussion, see Michael Yaconelli, *Messy Spirituality: God's Annoying Love for Imperfect People* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2002). His thoughts helped crystallize my own.
7. Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa and James D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year B* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Know Press, 1993), 40.
8. Ibid.
9. The section is assisted by the following article which I recommend: William Willimon, "The God We Hardly Knew," in *Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas*, edited by (Farmington, PA: The Plough Publishing House, 2001).