

One New Book for the Preacher

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David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: a Theological Anthropology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 2 vols., 1092 pages.

David Kelsey devoted much of his vocation as the Luther A. Weigle Professor of Theology at Yale University Divinity School to the study and teaching of Christian theological anthropology. He completed this two-volume work in his retirement. It is detailed and challenging to any reader. Its rewards make careful, sustained, and recurrent reading, best shared in conversation with colleagues, enriching for the religious practices of Christian faith in daily life in Christian communities. In fact one of Kelsey's main points is that our vocation occurs in *missio Dei*, the mission of God in the power of the Spirit sent by the Father and the Son, to sustain creation and every human being, to bring the whole creation to eschatological consummation, and to forgive and reconcile human beings in their many estrangements from each other and from the rest of God's good creation.

Kelsey alerts us that while each of the three parts of the two volume work can be read on its own, the parts are interdependent and necessary for each other. So it is important to recognize that all three parts have a common Christian conviction that God actively relates to us, and that this relation has consequences for what and who we are (our human nature and our identity) and for how we are to live in reference both to our ultimate context in relation to God and in our immediate contexts in daily life.

The common Christian belief is that God is best understood as triune and that God relates to us in three related, yet distinct ways:

- 1) God is the creator of all that is not God. God sustains all of creation and all human beings, enabling them to flourish in faith. Therefore, human beings are "Created: Living on Borrowed Breath."
- 2) God promises to all creation an eschatological consummation (a "new creation") and draws the creation and all human beings to it, enabling them to flourish in hope. Therefore, human beings are "Consummated: Living on Borrowed Time."
- 3) God reconciles us in our estrangements, the distortions of human life and identity in sins and sinfulness, enabling us to flourish in love. "Therefore, human beings are "Reconciled: Living by Another's Death."

To illustrate the rewards of a pastoral reading of Kelsey's important work, I shall concentrate on Part Two, "Consummated: Living on Borrowed Breath" (441-602), in which Kelsey describes Christian conviction that the triune God draws us to eschatological consummation. If a person lives in the expectation of this consummation, it is because God offers the gift of hope. Hope is the central theological virtue that Advent celebrates, and it is the subject of this issue of *The Journal for Preachers*. I urge that a good approach to Advent preaching this year would be to follow John Buchanan's recommendation of three Common Lectionary texts from Isaiah (See "Preaching the Advent Texts: Hope, Peace, Courage" in this issue), adding a fourth

pair of texts, Isaiah 7:10-16 and Matthew 1:18-25, for December 19, the last Sunday in Advent. In recommending this approach, I suggest Kelsey's presentation of hope and joy in God's promise of a final, eschatological consummation of every human being and of all the rest of creation as a good and correct theological foundation for Advent preaching.¹

1

In Part Two Kelsey elaborates the eschatological consummation of human beings and creation in five steps. The Spirit sent by the Father with the Son draws all creation to a final consummation. In a variety of ways, the New Testament heralds that the Spirit does really draw human creatures into the eschatological life revealed by God's having raised the crucified Jesus from the dead. In the synoptic gospels and Acts, the Holy Spirit empowers Jesus' proclamation, healing, teaching. The same Spirit in baptism empowers the community's proclamation of the kingdom arriving already in the mission of Jesus Christ. The kingdom of God is continuing to come until the consummation. In the gospel of John, Jesus breathes the Spirit upon the community to give them their new life in love. In Paul, the Spirit works in the common life of the community, especially through proclamation of the gospel to draw persons ever more deeply into life "in Christ." Commenting on the plurality of ways the New Testament proclaims the ultimate ground of our hope, Kelsey states: "To say that it is the Spirit 'with the Son' who draws humankind to eschatological consummation is to stress that the triune God relates to us ... in a particular, peculiar, concrete way as the advent of the fulfillment of an open-ended promise by God to all that is not God" (451).

2

Kelsey explores consequences for our daily living of God's drawing creation to consummation by focusing on the New Testament image of the kingdom of God and especially on Paul's use of apocalyptic rhetoric. In apocalyptic perspective the resurrection of Jesus from crucifixion, breaking unexpectedly into the events following Jesus' death, anticipates God's ultimate consummation of creation. God has already initiated the consummation of all things. So now, Kelsey suggests, we live on borrowed time. He explains the metaphor. We say, for example, a criminal convicted of a crime and waiting on another day in court is living on borrowed time. Sometimes a person who miraculously walks away from a near-fatal accident feels deeply that life is borrowed from death. In Kelsey's theological use of the metaphor, "living on borrowed time" refers instead to our having "a radically new gift of unanticipated, unearned, and unplanned possibilities. It is to understand one's world as the context for a new start, a new life." The various uses of apocalyptic serve to urge that our daily contexts are objects of God's mission, the *missio Dei*, to draw the creation and us to God's final purpose. Life in God's mission to the whole creation, in the kingdom of God, is an inexhaustible mystery. It causes the powers and forces by which the world lives, including political, ideological, social, cultural, and economic powers, to be subordinate and relative to the promise of God's consummation.

God offers this promise without condition to all of creation, but in practice it is actually conditioned by the distortions of our context, including the violence, trauma, suffering, and the reality that all our goods are mixed with evil. Kelsey affirms that

the kingdom of God gives only a limited meaningfulness to the historical changes we see. Kelsey does not favor recent commonplaces suggesting that history is intrinsically meaningful and moving progressively on its own course to higher good. Neither does he relish some recent theologies of history. For example, he does not find Oscar Cullmann's metaphor using the World War II Battle of the Bulge, which the Allies won as the decisive but not the final engagement of World War II, to symbolize the "already" but "not yet" of eschatological consummation. Kelsey prefers J. Louis Martyn's interpretation of Pauline apocalyptic symbols in cosmic, not historical terms. Apocalyptic rhetoric undermines the expectation that social and cultural changes will bring unambiguous social and cultural progress. Instead of historical progress, the prophetic texts in which God promises consummation to Israel in covenantal context and the New Testament stories of the resurrection of Jesus both offer eschatological blessing to humanity in a new relation to the world and to God. It is a gracious relationship. It affirms that the intimate relationship of Jesus to God has a promising future. It takes the resurrection of Jesus to signify God has begun to fulfill a blessing on all creation (I Cor. 15: 20, 23). It promises to all humankind communal participation as adopted children in Jesus' relationship with God. It is a promise that honors the fully human, embodied, finite creature.

3

The appropriate human response to God's relating to creation in the Spirit with Jesus Christ is that we flourish in hope. Kelsey speaks of this hope based on the singular way in which the triune God acts in the resurrection "by intruding the end time and its new creation into the livedworlds of the old creation" (501). He draws on liberation theology to signal the particular sensitivity of this hope to the bondage of oppression, manifested in the cross of Jesus, and which is still the daily lot of the poor, hungry, neglected, and abused people in the world.

In the midst of the continuing mix of evil and good in our daily lives, the real payoff in the Spirit with the Son is a joyous hopefulness which people enact in public practices. This hope is for the glorification of creation and all humanity. What we can say about this hope for glorification comes from the stories of the appearance of the resurrected Jesus in the gospels in which the followers of Jesus come to recognize him in a new body which Paul calls "a spiritual body" (I Cor. 15). Paul's image for this hope is "new creation." Life in the consummation of the new creation will be marked by peace, the absence of predatory killing, and freedom from suffering and grief. It will manifest interdependence in community and continued growth. This joyous hope for glory is lived out in present life in what traditionally has been called sanctification. A person living in hope enacts practices which seek and celebrate signs of human flourishing, and that may include action that contributes to social, cultural, economic, and political changes, all to show the liberty of God's new creative promise of blessing. Hope is "a disposition to participate actively in liberating movements of social change in which the triune *missio Dei* may also be at work" (513). These practices are aware of the various kinds of social power that constrain and cause suffering to human beings. To acquire such a disposition requires disciplines of life and heart, including developing human emotions, such as compassion and what William Lynch calls "absolute wishing,"² the wholehearted desiring of the promises of eschatological consummation that God offers to the children of the kingdom. Hope

also comes to us when we cultivate the imagination elicited by Jesus' parables which reveal the kingdom already coming before the full consummation of God's time.

This joyful hopefulness is Eucharistic, offers thanksgiving, and invites us to learn mastery of the vocabulary of hope. Such terms as holiness, sanctification, liberation, resistance, new creation, expectancy, anticipation, rejoicing, and righteous anger are concepts referring to and guiding the disciplines of hope, the intense, persistent desire and love for the kingdom of God.

4

The analysis of joy in hope has specific implications for who and what we are as persons. Kelsey speaks of our identity as human beings whom God graciously elects and upon whom God's judgment has already begun. "We are those who have been elected for eschatological consummation," and "We are those to whom the catastrophe of final judgment is happening" (527). Election is God's loving and free gift to us. God's judgment comes upon us because we face the inexplicable reality that we distort joy by our nature and in our behavior. In analyzing election, Kelsey notes that Holy Scripture uses such terms as "elected," "predestined," or "chosen" in different ways. In the Old Testament, God elects or chooses Abraham and all Israel for a specific task, to be a light to the Gentiles (Gen. 12:1-3; Deut. 7:6,7; Isa. 42:6), and chooses kings and prophets for their servant leadership and proclamation. In the New Testament, Jesus chooses his followers for ministry, and Paul confirms the continued election of Israel. In some texts, the election is for a particular relationship with God, as for Paul's notion that we are elected to be "in Christ Jesus" for salvation from sin. At other times, "election," "predestination," "chosen" are used with the sense of "elected for eschatological glory" without reference to human sinfulness (Romans 8:29-30; Col. 2:20; 3:12; Eph. 1:3-14). In another meaning, Mark and Matthew use "elect" in reference to those who will be in God's company in the judgment day. The apocalyptic images of Matthew 24 and Mark 13 signal that the final catastrophic judgment of God is cut short for the sake of the elect, to affirm that God is present with us now. Therefore we, as those who are judged in our election, have already entered the time of the final catastrophe that comes with the new creation in God's dealing with sin.

In regard to human nature, God brings to consummation what God has created. So Scripture leads us to hope for a consummation that brings radical change, yet which preserves, in some yet unimaginable way, the creaturely integrity of physical bodies. As God raised Jesus from the dead, so we in joyful hope await the new creation and anticipate a bodily identity which is no longer physical. Kelsey, acutely sensitive to the physical embodiment of personal individual life, suggests that our consummated "spiritual body" (I Cor. 15) need not be absolutely perfect. Since a disability is part of human identity, it could persist as a marker, even as the wounds of Christ persisted after his resurrection. Kelsey recognizes the conceptual challenges of the ultimate promises of God. He even suggests that it might be helpful for theologians with literary gifts or writers with theological gifts to write theological science fantasy to suggest plausible imaginary scenarios for God's consummation. Though he doesn't mention him, perhaps C. S. Lewis's adult and children's fiction might suggest what Kelsey has in mind.

At the end of Part Two, we find his account of the multiple practices of human beings whose actions distort and betray the joyful hope that God promises in the consummation of creation. In sinful practices, persons live literally without hope. They commit to practices which show their distorted outlook about God's future or their rejection of the present gifts for hope. In many sins human beings deny their election by God to service and deny God's judgment against their sinfulness that is already breaking into their lived reality. Without acknowledging God's judgment of social roles, human beings become hostage to the outcomes of their choices. On the other hand, they may reject election. Then a person may be optimistic about human accomplishments and abilities, but because he or she has no sense of living a life in response to God's election for service, the hopefulness of God's transformation is not acknowledged. The person is bound to the ideology and choices that go with it. Finally some acknowledge only God's final negative judgment. They are ultimately pessimistic or, in the extreme, they become completely despairing persons, experiencing the living death of the perpetual victim.

Summary

Kelsey describes human life in the light of God's promised eschatological consummation of creation in five steps.

1. The ultimate context of human beings in relation to God's eschatological consummation comes from the Spirit sent by God the Father with the Son.
2. With the new creation as the object of our hope, we live every day on time borrowed from God's future promised to all human beings and to all of the good creation.
3. Hope enables us to flourish because God breaks already into our present time with signs of the not-yet-fulfilled consummation.
4. We human beings are becoming something new in Jesus Christ.
5. In this present situation, God overcomes human sins and sinful human nature, manifest in their active and passive distortions of daily hopeful practices and of the final hope for the future.

Notes

1 Compare Sam Wells, "Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology," *Christian Century* (May 4, 2010), 35-37.

2 William F. Lynch, S.J., *Images of Hope* (New York: New American Library, 1965), 86-108, 122-136.