

Returning to the Border: Hope in Advent

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Here we go again. People are counting down shopping days until Christmas, and stores have had Christmas decorations in them since October. It seems like we were just here yesterday rather than nearly a year ago. Given the rush to Christmas, there is almost a sense of an eternal “now...is the time to shop.” The decorations and shopping mania are not the only parts of our lives that seem the same, however. It’s the political discussions, the ongoing wars, the continued gap between the rich and the poor – nothing seems to change. Despite the new hottest gift for the year, there is a deep suspicion that we have been here before, that this year is not all that different from last year. The bright lights and bottled cheerfulness coupled with the intransigence of our human problems can make this time of year especially susceptible to Qoheleth’s proclamation that “there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl. 1:9).

Truth be told, we are not immune to this seemingly cyclical movement from one present moment to the next as we think about ecclesial time. We too are back where we started as the church moves yet again into another season of Advent. Year after year we come to the same season, same sounding lectionary texts (which too are cyclical every fourth year), same sermons, same....Do we ever stop to wonder or pause to question? Why do we come back here year after year, repeat this cycle every year, begin every church year with Advent?

Many see Advent as a season of hope and expectation, but in the repetitive light mentioned above, one begins to wonder about saying anything about hope. Hope at its simplest is the idea of difference, a disjuncture, a break into a constant repetition. In other words, if we find ourselves back at the same place every year, what kind of conversation can we have about hope – a hope that challenges, that imagines newness, that can by its very definition mean a disruption into the same old, same old? Hope, thus described, would seem to challenge the tyranny of an endless present and also a cyclically repetitive understanding of the world. As Walter Brueggemann has said, “Hope is in the overriding power of God to work a new will against the order of the day. It is this act of hope which holds the present critically and loosely. Israel knows...that purpose of God finally will move against the way things are. The function of this sacred discontent which is Israel’s hope is to keep us from becoming excessively contented with the way things are.”¹

Given this understanding of hope, we will look anew at Advent, but will do so by first journeying to the border between Jordan and Israel.

Back to the Border

If there is ever a place where as much as life has changed it appears to have remained the same, it might be on the seemingly always contested border between Israel and its eastern neighbor, Jordan. This past year I had the opportunity to journey with a group of pilgrims over to Jordan and Israel. The pilgrimage began with a visit to Mt. Nebo, the traditional site where Moses and the children of Israel stood on the boundary of the promised land. Standing there centuries later, one is still surrounded

by the barrenness of the region directly connected to Nebo, while also looking across to the oasis that is Jericho and the verdant strip that surrounds the Jordan River. Ostensibly, this mountain top on the border between the wilderness, barren and inhospitable, and the land of promise, fertile and welcoming, serves as the setting of the book of Deuteronomy. Here on Nebo, Moses offers several last sets of instruction for the children of Israel as they are about to make the crossing from the wilderness and their seemingly endless wanderings into the land of the promise, full of pomegranates, milk, honey, and a settled life. As Deuteronomy imagines it, Nebo is both a transition from the wilderness to the promise and also a place of waiting. Israel, full of the pregnant possibilities of the promised land seemingly in their grasp, must wait and listen, as Moses speaks to them over and over again (at least thirty chapters worth)!

In his commentary on Deuteronomy, Patrick Miller refers to Deuteronomy as a “boundary book,” not only physically as the boundary between the Torah and the historical books, but also as we have already noted, a book whose setting ostensibly sits on the boundary between the wilderness and the promised land.² By looking at Deuteronomy 8, we see perhaps as clearly as anywhere else in the book the difference that forms the distinction between the wilderness and the promised land. The wilderness is “an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions” with little water and little food except that provided by God (Dt. 8:15ff). Existence is made possible here only through God’s providential care that is so powerfully mysterious that the Israelites can walk for forty years and the “clothes on [their] back did not wear out and [their] feet did not swell...” (Dt. 8:4).³ In contrast, the promised land is “a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing...” (Deuteronomy 8:7-9). Yet, this settled life has its accompanying danger – the danger of forgetfulness – “Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God... [and] say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth’” (Dt. 8:11,17). On one side of Nebo there is the wilderness, a place of danger and lack of necessities, yet permeated by the mysterious providential care of God. On the other side, we find the land of promise with its abundance and relative security, yet the possibility that the distraction of abundance eventually can lead to imagined self-sufficiency.

Geographically, Mt. Nebo sits on this boundary between the wilderness and the promised land, while Moses’ speeches found in Deuteronomy literarily, and literally, sit at the same boundary. As Patrick Miller explores and interprets Deuteronomy, its “boundary” nature also moves forward into an interpretive, functional quality as generations of Deuteronomy readers find themselves brought back to the boundary between the wilderness and the promised land.⁴ This imaginary journey to the boundary becomes a way for future children of Israel to have current assumptions challenged, their imaginations reoriented, and their lives recast. For a generation that finds itself in a wilderness situation of scarcity and need, the boundary functions as a reminder that God has been and will be faithful to God’s promises to lead them from a tenuous situation fraught with lack and threat to a “land flowing with milk and honey.” Here at the boundary, these wilderness wanderers encounter a faithful promise and promise keeper as their imaginations are engendered to see that the wilderness is not

their final home.

On the other hand, the journey back to the boundary for those in the settled land exposes their forgetfulness, unmasks their idolatrous self-sufficiency, and calls them back into relationship with the God who provides. Here at the boundary, the settled generation's sinful replacement of trust in God with trust in self is laid bare, as well as the unjust and unloving ways of life that this misplaced trust has brought into existence. Eventually, as Deuteronomy suggests, this way of forgetfulness leads to desertion and death (Dt. 28ff). For the settled forgetter then, Deuteronomy functions as a stark awakening and call to repentance as we can see in the story of Josiah, who, as the narrator tells his story in II Kings 22, encounters what many believe is part of Deuteronomy and engages in nationwide repentance and reform.

The boundary challenges settled patterns of thought. While one's social location determines the nature of the challenge, Deuteronomy's boundary functions to overturn cycles of hopelessness or forgetfulness by bringing the reader into contact with the God of the boundary (and either side of the boundary). Thus, the boundary is a nexus of newness, an intersection between promise and fulfillment, a location of imagination that directly envisions hope beyond present circumstances or repentance that leads to a hope-filled reimagining of the present circumstances.

Advent – A Border?

Like Deuteronomy, Advent can be seen as a border. Literally, it functions as the boundary between the old liturgical year and the new liturgical year. We have moved through the year with its seasons and celebrations and now mark the beginning of a new year by returning to Advent. It marks the border between the old and new in simple terms of ecclesial time.

Imaginatively, however, Advent has the ability to function much like Deuteronomy as an invitational journey back to the boundary that engenders hope and challenge for both the troubled wanderer and the comfortable settler. Advent's admixture of past and future by definition invites its participants to a nexus, an intersection, where past promises and care are recalled and future visions of a restored creation are encountered. As Deuteronomy brings generation after generation back to the boundary, so the texts that fill the Advent lectionary yearly bring generations to the boundary offering promise and challenge.

For those who find themselves in situations of exile, lack, and brokenness, the journey to the texts of Advent provides hope that their current situations of privation are not eternally set and determined. To be caught in endless cycles of violence and poverty is not their timeless lot. The promise-making God who has acted before in ways of liberation, restoration, and newness has a vision for these struggling in the wilderness, and the texts of Advent paint the landscape of this new future.

A casual glance through this year's lectionary texts offers glimpses that are offered to reshape the imaginations of those struggling, hurting, and broken. In the first words of Isaiah 40, the prophet speaks of newness and promise to a people who have lost all hope of God's attention and power, who are exiled and cut off from God's care. Speaking in tender confidence, the first words out of the prophet's mouth are "Comfort, comfort" (Isa. 40:1). Yet comfort in the midst of distress takes on the form of God's in-breaking into their banished state and the forming of a way out that was not there before. The wilderness will no longer be a place of estrangement and loss,

but will become the pathway for the presence of God to return. While this may seem a promise that is too good to be true, the impermanence of the human condition is compared to the permanence of the Lord's word which will accomplish its purpose of healing and renewal (Isa. 40:6ff, and Isa. 55:11). In a compelling image for those lost in the wilderness where life is precarious and provisions are scarce, the prophet concludes this section with a pastoral promise of a good shepherd: "He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep" (Isa. 40:11). Coming back to this text full of promises in the midst of Advent reminds those trapped in cycles of poverty that newness has come before and will come again (Isaiah 61).

In truth, God's in-breaking ways weave throughout the Advent lessons from the play on Isaiah's image of the voice crying in the wilderness associated with John the Baptist (Mark 1 and John 1) to the ancient promises to David in 2 Samuel 7 that function at the Advent boundary to foster a vision of God's kingdom of peace. In many ways the journey back to the border becomes a hermeneutical lens that invites the church as it moves through Advent to proclaim and claim God's promises of newness, which is the very essence of hope. In particular, however, for those for whom life is a constant struggle, who find themselves in the midst of scarcity, exile, and brokenness, the boundary journey becomes an expedition that breaks open the seemingly endless now of the present. It is an expedition of hope.

Yet, the journey is not only for wilderness wanderers, but also for those who find themselves hypnotized by the seductive materialism and consumerism of our age, which it is not an exaggeration to say reaches its zenith during the Advent season. Whereas the hope for those for whom the present is precarious manifests itself in the promise that God's coming kingdom will bring healing and restoration, the hope for the seduced settler is that they will be shaken out of their stupor and moved back to faithfulness. In Deuteronomy the danger of the settled land was that it would produce walking amnesiacs who became so inured to their imagined self-sufficiency that they would turn their back on God. In our world this danger still exists. The trip back to the border provided by these Advent texts speaks a counter-testimony that challenges all hints of control, management, and self-sufficiency.⁵ The God described in these texts is no distant deity who is uninvolved in the ways of the world, but one who has dangerously entered into the affairs of creation (see Luke 1:26ff) and will do so again.

The peril for the settled is that they will be so enmeshed in the present and its power structures that they will neither be expecting anything new nor even able to notice it as it erupts. At the Advent boundary, Jesus' enigmatic words in Mark 13 about the coming kingdom function to shock their readers out of sleep-filled complacency and into eager anticipatory wakefulness. Similarly, the reminder that God's time schedule is different than human expectations in 2 Peter 3:8-15 serves as a call to repentance that leads to a fervent waiting imbued with a resolute move towards peace. For those in danger of sleep or slowness to repent, the Advent journey to the border is hope-filled primarily not in offering a vision of God's coming newness, but in imaginatively jolting them out of their apathy and inertia into attentive watchfulness.

Moreover, the descriptions of the coming kingdom in the Advent texts challenge the idolatrous arrangements that comfortable settlers have with systems of power

and control. By offering a vision of the coming kingdom that focuses on justice, righteousness, steadfast faithfulness, and peace (Ps. 85:10), any system of power that fosters injustice is called into question and shown to be transitory. By revealing the earthly emperor's clothes to be vanishing and impermanent, these texts also have an ironic movement towards hope as they can invite those in comfort and power into anticipatory partnership with the coming kingdom in such a way that they become, albeit provisionally, beacons of hope for those lost in the wilderness. Instead of working for the maintenance of current power structures which keep those trapped in the wilderness in endless cycles of poverty, those awakened at the Advent border find themselves summoned to work for justice, righteousness, and peace. Thus, these awakened settlers, who can impact the systems around them in small and large ways, become pioneers of the coming kingdom provisionally embodying the coming justice and truth and working to provide hope for their "deserted" brothers and sisters.

Yet, they are not the only ones who may be called to the border in these Advent texts who have the power to make a difference. In the plaintive call that begins Isaiah 64, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down," it can be imagined that at least one Advent text suggests that God can be induced to the border and invited into action. The people making the summons dare to evoke within God's memory the unexpected times in the past when God has broken the boundary between heaven and earth (Isa. 64:3). It is daring, because the prophet imagines that those who are waiting at the border have sinned and broken covenant with God. In response to their sinfulness, God has chosen to become absent, thus making them a "deserted" people. These wilderness waiters, however, are creatively insistent in their invitation directed towards God. Besides acknowledging their transgressions, they appeal to God to remember that they have been handmade by God and despite everything are still God's people. They are doomed in endless cycles of transgression if God chooses to remain absent; thus, they reach out to invite God to break anew the boundary between heaven and earth and move into action. Here, the Advent hope at the border is that God might move out of the "now" of God's absence and come down once more. In this light, the Advent engagement of Gabriel's announcement to Mary in Luke 1 could be seen as an invitation for God to remember that unexpected time when God came down and to induce God to come yet again.

Three Journeys to the Border

Each year we come back to the border at Advent. In Advent, we who are lost in the wilderness are brought to the border to remember that God is not finished with the world. Thus, our yearly journey in Advent is our insistence to recall that there is always hope for newness. The difficulties, hardships, and evil of today are not permanent. The world is not static and fixed so that what always was, will always be. We are not trapped by endless cycles of violence, poverty, depression, and death. In Advent we lay claim to the truth that God is not finished with us or the world. At the Advent border, we anticipate a day when every tear will be wiped away, death will be no more, and we will be with God.

In Advent, we who are comfortable are challenged out of our lethargy. The journey back to the border shows us that the powers that be, as well as our mistaken accommodation to them, will not last. Our hope is that we will be provoked enough to repent; that is, in encountering the promise of God's coming kingdom, we will

both move our allegiance back to the One whose kingdom knows no end and join God by offering ourselves for the renewal and restoration of justice, righteousness, and truth.

Wherever we find ourselves, Advent invites us back to the border where we encounter hope. Yet the deep hope of Advent might not be primarily that we are brought back to the border to be transformed, but perhaps that we dare to imagine that God is invited to the border as well. It could be that Advent is also the invitation of a waiting people for God to come and settle us all in the promised land, once and for all.

Notes

1 Walter Brueggemann, *Hope within History* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), 84.

2 Patrick Miller, *Deuteronomy* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 9.

3 All references to Scripture are to the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

4 Miller, 3. Miller lists three different sets of circumstances as pertinent to Deuteronomy: 1) a time before entering the abundance of the promised land where only the wilderness is known; 2) a time in the midst of the abundance; 3) a time of exile when every abundance had been lost.

5 Brueggemann, 87-90. Brueggemann argues that the “enemies of hope” include “muteness, fulfillment, and technique, all ways of trying to keep life on our own terms.”