

PREACHING ADVENT ----SOME REFLECTIONS

Advent: In general:

We know, through painful contemporary experience, how goes the world these days. For those of us in the first world, who are educated, young and well employed, the world is going quite well—if you can ignore the spirit numbing 60- or 70-hour work week. For the underclass of our world, either in the prosperous first world, or in under developed nations, the world is not going well. Things are severely broken, and the future looks even bleaker than the present. Who can blot out the images we are fed daily? —military skirmishes in the streets of the Holy Land, African Aids, refugees, third world poverty burdened by crushing debt, drug dealers on our streets, children shot in schools and global warming.

Advent begins the Christian liturgical year, and it presents us with other images. For these four weeks we will feast our imaginations on the images of: a just shoot; the return of Christ to judge; Jerusalem standing wrapped in robes of justice awaiting the return of her children from exile; the mountains made low, the gorges leveled; the voice in the desert; the crooked ways made straight; the winnowing fan, the unquenchable fire and the awe-filled exclamations of Elizabeth and Mary.

The prophets Jeremiah, Baruch, Zephaniah, Micah and John promise us the coming of a brand-new age. For the unprepared, the bloated, the indifferent and the evil doers, the news is not good and catches them completely off guard. But for the long suffering and the hope filled, the news seems too good to be true. God has noticed them after all and is coming to save them. There will be rest for the weary and safety for the vulnerable in the hands of God.

The scriptural images this Advent will help us stay engaged in our daily struggles to bring their promise to completion; they will steer our course and enter our daily prayer. We will be ready to welcome the God who comes to deliver us. God will come, because God has come before, and our confidence in the faithfulness of God fills us with the hope for new possibilities. We trust the promises of Advent because we can trust the promises of God.

“Advent: is not a biblical term. God’s “coming close: has two aspects to it--- judgment and salvation. In God, these two dichotomies are united. Advent remembers God’s deeds in the past and trusts that God will not remain passive in the present or in the future.

Lectionary themes

The pattern for the readings for Years, A, B, C, is as follows:

- the first readings,(except Advent B)---- speak of a coming age
- the second readings----have eschatological themes which either portray a future age or encourage Christians to prepare
- Gospel readings--- 1st. Sunday---- “little apocalypses: from the Synoptics
- 2nd. & 3rd. Sundays---- John the Baptist, or the Magi, forerunners of a new age
- 4th. Sunday---- scenes from the Annunciation

The prophetic texts focus on the Bible’s faith concerning the future, what we call, “realistic: eschatology. It is not so much a final, total consummation of the world by fire; but the emergence out of the crisis of the “Day of the Lord:, when the world will be as God intended it all along. The prophetic texts generally present a message of hope for a new age, a new “shalom: when the world will be in equilibrium. The symbol for this is depicted as the security of Jerusalem.

Thus, the Advent Hebrew texts image a future of peace, justice, preservation of individual human lives, and rule by the one God has chosen. In our Lectionary selections, these themes are particularly strong during the first and second Sundays. The day of crisis is coming and safe passage through it depends totally on the “Son of Man:. The task of this one who is to come will be not to waste anything good, true and pure. Whether the prophetic literature is describing realistic and earthly images or elaborate images of apocalyptic futurism, there is the promise of safety in God’s hand, a basis for hope and action.

The Epistle and Gospel selections present more frightening images of fire and turmoil that we must pass through to the future utopia. Yet these readings also contain the ancient hope that God will establish a new age of justice and equity to carry the old world away.

A better future requires a lot of effort right now; peace does not just happen. The season challenges us to ask: which set of images will we steer our lives by? We are invited to turn away from the choices of our peers that are based on false hope and embrace the promises of God. The Hebrew and then Christian communities that passed on these powerful and sometimes frightening pictures of the future, were themselves a frightened and vulnerable community. They were marginal and

often under crushing forces. Thus, they imaged a future when fire would consume the false securities of an age hostile to God and give those faithful ones a glimpse of the city of God. To a community struggling to maintain its faith in a God, who would initiate the new age for them, the readings are like the words of a mother assuring a child frightened by the dark, “There, there, everything is going to be alright.:

How does the preacher deal with the “futuristic texts: we encounter this Advent?. We need to remember that they are not history written in advance, they are not a precise map of the road ahead. The biblical details are not predictions, that map out the future; rather they evoke it. They show that the divine intention is to complete the work of blessing begun in our world. Any good deed done will be vindicated; any evil will be overcome.

The biblical images give our Christian lives the contours for living in the meanwhile, in the in-between-times before God brings in the new age in its completion. Only God can finish the work God has begun. The readings strengthen our vision of that future and call us to respond to the vision in the actions of our daily lives. If God wants a world without tears, and these readings show that, then we need to do something about bringing that world into reality---no rich just getting richer, no poor, just getting poorer. The Advent message beckons us into the future; it gives shape to our lives. A just world, an equitable world is promised, “Let’s go for it!: Now we can get a glimpse and foretaste of the coming realm, now we can do something about seeing its signs among us; but we cannot bring it to its fullness.

In Advent, Jesus’ life story can shape us and give us a foretaste of God’s coming victory. His ministry of healing, forgiveness and advocacy shows us clearly how our futures should look. In him and the moments reflected in the stories, we see the new Jerusalem, present and anticipated. We preachers raise the light of Advent, its images of the future, to give us clues of our destiny and a light to guide our present.

Preaching Luke in Year C

Luke raises up John the Baptist as a link between O.T. prophets and Jesus. John is clearly connected to the long prophetic tradition. He’s of the priestly family, yet he wears the camel’s hair and leather belt of the prophet, especially that of Elijah. He denies his own importance, claiming he is just at voice. He is a link between Isaiah and Jesus (2nd. Sunday). He is popular among the masses and Jesus extols

him as the greatest “among those born of women (7:28). He is a strong, critical voice against the indulgences of the current society and he calls for a radical change among all, especially those who wield influence.

Though his preaching is contains scathing criticism and a call to reform, he is still described by Luke (3rd. Sunday) as preaching “the good news to the people:, for he is painting the arrival of the Messiah who will initiate a new reign where the people will be forgiven, healed and saved.

John the Baptist, the stern and uncompromising preacher, helps us go deeper than our usual superficial attempts at change. Only the coming of our God can free us from what enslaves us, can drive out the all-pervasive darkness that touches every part of our lives and bring to bear the longed for salvation. John’s voice in Advent is urgent, for he sees God breaking into human history with judgment for those who, for so long, had violated the covenant.

It’s customary for us to look to Jesus’ more soothing style and gentle ways. We would quickly, perhaps too quickly, brush John off the Advent stage. But in this liturgical year we can’t do that so easily since he appears in the selections from Luke on the 2nd and 3rd Sundays. There he is shaking us out of our complacency. Maybe he forces us to look at our self-satisfaction and false securities. Where have we placed our confidence, on what are we relying? In our world most of the population suffers daily deprivation. Meanwhile, for the few and privileged, there are opulence, technological wizardry, indulgence and cravings that are once again so evident during this shopping season.

We notice in Advent that the readings do not advocate a mere posture of waiting. Rather, our work is to repent. This repentance in not a private affair only. On the 3rd Sunday of Advent, (Luke 3: 10-18), John tells the crowd to share their coats and food; he tells tax collectors not to cheat on what they collect and soldiers not to do violence. Repentance was a call to return to being a covenanted people, this would make “the rough ways smooth: (2nd Sunday).

The readings show the prophets’ pointing to a time of fulfillment. And we see Christ as that fulfillment. But we need to be careful and read the historical fulfillment in Christ with sensitivity. For Christ himself points to a future for us, Israel, the church and the entire world--- a future when all shall be complete.

We remember that we look on Advent from the vantage of our Easter faith, lest we

miss with the disciples, the significance of Christ's simple birth and his words and actions.

We celebrate his birth knowing how the story will end, God has been faithful and has kept promises. But the first part of the season is about preparation. We focus, with the guidance of Luke, on the second coming of Christ. The Hebrew prophets prepare us over years of human history for the coming of the Christ. But Luke tells us, when Christ returns, it will be without warning. The Christ we are being prepared to meet, the one for whom we long, will come in fullness at the second advent, and we keep vigilance, holding the promises and faithfully living out of our hope, so that we will be ready when he returns.

The Jewish Community and our Celebration of Advent:

The first readings in our Lectionary have been chosen in light of the Gospel selection, because they “point to their fulfillment: in Christ. To put it simply, we see the promise in the Hebrew Scriptures (1st. reading) and the fulfillment in the New Testament (Gospel selection). But this treatment of the former texts does not do them justice. The Hebrew texts should not just be seen as preparing the way for Christ. The prophetic message they contain still speaks to our generation and we need to read them and appreciate the message they still hold for us.

Advent is an excellent time for the preacher to focus a preaching from the first readings. A useful publication for more reflection of this relationship between the two testaments and its consequences for our preaching can be found in the Bishops' booklet **God's Mercy Endures Forever**. The helpful, **Sourcebook for Sundays and Season**, (Liturgy Training Publications) quotes the bishops' document and can serve as a guideline for Advent preaching:

“The lectionary readings from the prophets are selected to bring out the ancient Christian theme that Jesus is the “fulfillment’ of the biblical message of hope and promise, the inauguration of the “days to come’ described, for example, by the daily Advent Masses, and on Sundays by Isaiah in Cycle A and Jeremiah in Cycle C for the first Sunday of Advent. This truth needs to be framed very carefully. Christians believe that Jesus is the promised Messiah who has come (see Luke 4:22) but also know that his messianic kingdom is not yet fully realized. The ancient messianic prophecies are not merely temporal predictions but profound expressions of eschatological hope. Since this dimension can be misunderstood or even missed altogether, the homilists needs to raise clearly the hope found in the prophets and heightened in the proclamation of Christ. This hope includes trust in what is promised but not yet seen. While the biblical prophecies of an age of universal “shalom: are “fulfilled: (i.e. irreversibly inaugurated) in Christ's coming,

that fulfillment is not yet completely worked out in each person's life or perfected in the world at large.....It is the mission of the church, and also that of the Jewish people, to proclaim and to work to prepare the world for the full flowering of God's reign, which is but is "not yet:....Both the Christian "Our Father: and the Jewish "Kaddish: exemplify this message. Thus, both Christianity and Judaism seal their worship with a common hope: 'Thy kingdom come!':

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",
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