



Texts in Context

Looking to the City: The Old Testament Lessons for Advent and Christmas Day (Year C)*

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WHAT PROMISE MIGHT BE SPOKEN TO CHRISTIAN HEARERS OF SERMONS PREACHED on these Old Testament prophetic texts? It is not surprising that we hear such texts through Handel's praise of Jeremiah's "righteous branch" (Advent 1), the "shoot from the stump of Jesse" (Isaiah 11). Surely Micah's promise of "one who is to rule in Israel" (Advent 4) will call to mind the one over whom the inscription stood, "This is the king of the Jews" (Luke 23:38). It is as Christians that we hear these texts and the sermons preached on them. The Lord we worship is the one who read the prophetic word and declared: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). But on the way to naming the name of Jesus in whom all God's promises have their "Yes" (2 Cor 1:20), we do well to pause to consider how the people of God heard them "then." In doing this we may find an illuminating suggestion as we seek to hear and heed how the living word of God would speak to us in our situation. That may be particularly true as we seek to live and minister with "the city" in view.

*This essay was written after a conversation with Mr. Bryan Berry, Director of Service to Organizations, the Amhearst H. Wilder Foundation, Dr. Fred Gaiser, Professor of Old Testament, Luther Seminary, and Pastor Mary Halvorson, Grace University Lutheran Church, Minneapolis.

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I. "A CITY NOT FORSAKEN"? ON THE CHALLENGE OF PARADIGM SHIFTS

The city cries out for our attention. It cries out to all of us. Very directly, as the percentage of the U.S. population involved in agriculture continues to decline, the church called to "become all things to all people" for the sake of the gospel (1 Cor 9:22) finds itself called to face with creativity and intelligence what Randy Nelson in this issue rightly calls "the new frontier." Less obviously, the rural pastor finds herself working with couples whose children have left to live and work (or at least seek work) in the city. Similarly, the suburban pastor ministers to people whose well-being is clearly linked with what happens in the city. As we move through and beyond such concrete matters as the distribution of tax dollars, must we not say that of all of us—that our future is tied up with what happens in the teeming turbulence of promise and threat that is the city? We may not live and work in the city, but do we not all need to minister with the city "in view"?

But we do not attend comfortably to the city. The city seems strange to many of us, likely confusing and possibly threatening. In the language of James Nelson in this issue we do not find it comfortable to make and keep "friends on the border of the ordered world." It might be too strong to say that we "forsake" the city, but perhaps we do yearn somehow to be able to do work that is "pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years" (Mal 3:4; Advent 2). Nostalgia has a strong grip, even if what we hanker for might actually be a highly romanticized past, a "returning to where we have never been."

In this challenge of change we can find connection with a people of God who faced another crisis of the sort we have learned to call "a paradigm shift." In our conversation looking toward this article Fred Gaiser described the crisis for Israel in this way: Can a nomadic faith survive in a settled land? Israel faced the need to shift from a nomadic existence to an agricultural one. Could Israel make that change without adopting the agricultural pagan faith of Canaan? We face the need to shift from an agricultural worldview to an urban one. Such change was not easy for Israel; it will not be easy for us.

II. A PROMISE NOT FULFILLED? WHAT IS GOD GOOD FOR NOW?

These are mostly late texts. They reflect a time of disappointment. The exilic prophets had been heard to speak glowingly of the return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the temple. But the life of the people had not been miraculously transformed. The temple gives focus to this feeling. R. E. Clements summarizes the sense of dissatisfaction:

The doctrine grew up that five things were lacking in the second temple that had existed in the first. What these five things were varied slightly in Rabbinic belief, but significant among them are the Shekinah, the Rabbinic concept of the divine presence, and the holy spirit.¹

¹R. E. Clements, *God and Temple* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1965) 126.

Hardly a trivial matter! If God is not present, little wonder that life is disappointing: no king, no independence, no abundance of life!

So what word of God will the prophet speak in such a time? In one sense the words are not changed: justice, righteousness, salvation, safety, security. The promises need to be newly spoken and heard. But now perhaps it becomes necessary and indeed possible to speak and hear them the more clearly as *God's* promises. Thus, Jer 33:14 (Advent 1) adds the word "I will fulfill the promise" to the parallel earlier promise in Jer 23:5-6. The people are called to cling not to the promises as their secured possession, but to the God who promises! Thus Claus Westermann distinguishes such later prophetic speaking from the earlier oracles which spoke of a specific event in the future: "they are no longer intended to be authoritative proclamations, but rather expressions of hope and expectation."²

But to make clear to any people that the preached promise is *God's* promise is surely not to evacuate the promise of content. That what is promised is not a "thing," which can be mechanically guaranteed and deposited to one's account; that what is promised is rather that the living God will come to bless and save—this does not leave the believer's "hope and expectation" without content.

So, as we read these post-exilic promises we come to words like "justice" and "safety" once again. And as we turn toward the challenge of the city, we may find those same words coming into our petitions. The challenges facing our cities and those who would minister with the city in view are so great that we can hardly claim that "justice" and "safety," not to mention "salvation," are descriptions of present reality. How do those who work and live in the city "keep hope alive" in the light of staggering rates of unemployment and crime, in the face of the stifling anonymity of being alone in a crowd? How can we who minister with the city in view be hopeful?

III. A PRESENCE NOT EVICTED? RIGHTEOUSNESS IN OUR MIDST

The concentric literary structure for the lesson for Advent 3, Zeph 3:14-18a, gives us our clue:

- A You sing (3:14)
 - B The Lord turns away enemies (3:15)
 - C The Lord is in your midst (3:15)
 - D You shall not fear (3:15)
 - E On that day – for Jerusalem (3:16)
 - D' Do not fear (3:16)
 - C' The Lord is in your midst (3:17)
 - B' The Lord gives victory (3:17)
 - A' The Lord will sing (3:17)

²Claus Westermann, *Prophetic Oracles of Salvation in the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991) 150.

Note particularly the claim: “The Lord is in your midst!” As we seek to speak and hear God’s word through these Sundays of Advent, we do so as people who know that at the end of Advent we will celebrate the coming of the word made flesh. Aware in our time, as the post-exilic prophets were in theirs, of difficulties and complexities, we will surely want to claim no less strongly the presence of God as the basis for hope. We said that part of the sense of disappointment for post-exilic Israel was the sense that God was not truly present in the temple. Gerhard Von Rad points to one way of responding to such disappointment:

As time went on, the consolidation of the post-exilic community, which apparently corresponded to the restoration which many of the returned exiles hoped for, had become more and more bound up with an increasingly consistent elimination of eschatological ideas...the ruling priestly aristocracy in Jerusalem tended to push eschatological expectation more and more on one side, and finally forced it into separation.³

The strong cultic theology of priesthood and law could not understand one who was heard to say “I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands” (Mark 14:58). Well, perhaps we also cannot understand this. But was not Kant right, after all, that the practical reason is more fundamental than the pure reason? Are Christians not called into a *living* of the presence of God? What was Paul asking the Corinthians? “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s spirit dwells in you?” (1 Cor 3:16). Paul is talking about a real presence, a real relationship. Lutheran Christians do not follow Paul or Luther if they speak of this relationship as entailing merely a forensic change. Recall Luther’s words from his sermon of 1519 entitled “On Two Kinds of Righteousness”:

Therefore this alien righteousness, instilled in us without our works by grace alone – while the Father, to be sure, inwardly draws us to Christ – is set opposite original sin, likewise alien, which we acquire without our works by birth alone. Christ daily drives out the old Adam more and more in accordance with the extent to which faith and knowledge of Christ grow. For alien righteousness is not instilled all at once, but it begins, makes progress, and is finally perfected at the end through death.⁴

It surely sounds as if some kind of actual change is expected, given this presence of God “in our midst.” Salvation is happening! And what is that? Westermann has emphasized that God’s activity in deliverance and God’s activity in blessing together constitute God’s saving activity.⁵ Readers of this journal may remember Terence Fretheim’s article on “Salvation in the Bible vs. Salvation in the Church” in which both the vertical and the horizontal aspects of human transfor-

³Gerhard Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper, 1965) 297.

⁴Timothy F. Lull, ed., *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989) 157.

⁵Westermann, *Prophetic Oracles*, 16; cf. his comments on “restoration,” 156.

mation were stressed.⁶ “Jerusalem will live in safety” (Jer 33:16; Advent 3): there’s a word that is much on our lips today – safety. What is involved in that? A partial word study includes ecological order (Lev 25:18-19), rest from enemies and abundance for the land (Deut 12:10; 33:28), being “surrounded” by God (Deut 33:12), peaceful sleep (Ps 4:8), overturning enmity between humans and animals (Ezek 34:25), restoration of the city (Zech 14:11).

Aah, but can we really get to the city?

IV. “A CITY NOT FORSAKEN”? MINISTRY IN THE MIDDLE AND THE MEANTIME

As much as we may need to have the city in view in our ministry, can we get there from these prophetic texts? Isn’t that a leap our exegetical legs should be too weak to manage? After all, the city named “Not Forsaken” in Advent 4’s Isaiah text is not any old city. No matter what our homiletical inspiration, Jesus was born in Micah’s Bethlehem (Advent 3), not in Minneapolis!

I suggest that we can get to the city as we read and hear these texts within the comprehensive context of faith. Consider the route provided by the doctrine of creation. We have learned to read Genesis as telling us that humankind is created “not to minister to the gods but to civilize the earth.” This phrasing is from Westermann who goes on to speak of the distinctive blessing given to humankind as “a forward-thrusting, ever pregnant power of becoming.”⁷ Thus Genesis 4 tells us of Jabal, the ancestor of those who live in tents and have livestock; of Jubal, the ancestor of all those who play the lyre and pipe; of Tubal-cain, who made all kinds of bronze and iron tools – and, before them, of Cain who built a city. To link Cain and the city may remind us that the city is not exempted from the mark of sin (if we needed to be so reminded). But neither has the Creator God forsaken the city!

As surely as it is that Creator God who redeems, we are freed by our liberating Lord to be once again creatures, to serve the Creator’s will. Thus the restoration spoken of in Jeremiah 33 (Advent 1) involves such change in “the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem” that there shall be heard “the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing” (33:10-11). Or again, 33:12: “in all its towns there shall again be pasture for shepherds resting their flocks.” The singers in 33:11 make their music “as they bring thank offerings to the house of the Lord.” In our conversation Bryan Barry, director of service to organizations for the Wilder Foundation in St. Paul, bore eloquent testimony to the impressive efforts of people of faith who are at work in the cities of this land (and those of other lands) to serve human life in such concrete (may we say “creational”) areas as education, employment, health services.

The redeemed return to creation, to their distinctive role, and so to the city. But may not the city be seen even more directly caught up in the prophetic

⁶Terence Fretheim, “Salvation in the Bible vs. Salvation in the Church,” *Word & World* 13 (1993) 363-72.

⁷Claus Westermann, *Creation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 51, 55.

promises? In Jer 33: 16 (Advent 1) it is Jerusalem that will be called “The Lord is our righteousness.” This seems a development from the parallel text in Jeremiah 23:5, where it is the righteous branch who will be so named. Note too that in the Micah 5 text (Advent 3) it is the city itself, Bethlehem of Ephrathah, that is addressed. It is as if the city were a living thing, capable of being addressed, of being blessed.

The children in the back seat of this article may well be asking, “Have we gotten to the city yet?” Well, perhaps not quite. To get all the way there we may need to come through Advent to Christmas Day, to the Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 62. Here we have the call to lift up an ensign over the *peoples*. The prophetic word does claim that the Lord “shall be great *to the ends of the earth*” (Micah 5:4; Advent 3). Isaiah speaks of the Lord proclaiming “to the end of the earth” (62:11). So who is this “holy people,” who will be called “Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken”? Given Third Isaiah’s welcome of the foreigners to God’s “people” in 56:1-8 (where the temple is called a “house of prayer for all peoples”), may we not reach out beyond Israel as we hear this verse? We hear the verse as Christians, who know that “salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22).

As we read these texts we seem to stand on tiptoe, stretching to see a time somewhere over the horizon. There is something out there that we cannot see very clearly through these texts. Thus there were strong strands in post-exilic Judaism which saw the hope for the future requiring the destruction of enemies.⁸ There are glimpses in these texts of a different future (as in the Isaiah 62 text for Advent 4; but compare the Zephaniah 3 text for Advent 3). Christians read these texts claiming to be disciples of a Jesus who went about saying such things as “love your enemies; pray for those who persecute you” (Matt 5:44).

Which Christian will step forward to say that such a city has been reached? If that is the end we strain to see, we stand back with these Old Testament believers who look to the future in hope. But meanwhile, in the meantime, we have something to do. There is a strong call in these texts to repentance and what we once called amendment of life. And church folks, clergy very much included, do not escape mention. The Malachi text (Advent 2) speaks of the Lord purifying the descendants of Levi and refining them “like gold and silver.” We are talking about a blast-furnace purification here, though purification is not destruction. But what would it mean for the priests in our time to be purified? In our conversation Pastor Mary Halvorson persistently asked: “Who are we? How do we justify ourselves? What is God’s call to us?”

Pastor Halvorson was speaking as one who ministers in the middle of the city. Perhaps the prophetic call has particular challenges for those who serve there. But all of us, as we minister with the city in view, will have enough with which to occupy ourselves. Take again that matter of loving the enemies. Walter Wink speaks of this as “the goad that can drive us to God” and writes:

What has often been a purely private affair—justification by faith through grace—has now, in our age, grown to embrace the world...we can no more save

⁸Westermann, *Prophetic Oracles*, 216-223.

ourselves from our enemies than we can save ourselves from sin, but God's amazing grace offers to save us from both.⁹

We will have enough to do—all of us: those who serve in the turbulent middle of the city and the rest of us who serve with the city in view. All of us this Advent will have enough work to do. Part of that work will be to wait and to watch. For finally what we hope to see is what someone else saw:

And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride for her husband....I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb....The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. (Revelation 21:2, 22, 24).

In the Next Issue...

Texts in Context will consider Old Testament texts for Lent (Series C).

⁹Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 263.