



“Where the angels long to look!” First Peter as Advent Preacher

First Peter is not given to us for Advent preaching—at least not in the Revised Common Lectionary, which includes no Advent pericopes from this letter. But we could make it happen. First Peter’s call to a living hope and faithful obedience, awaiting a salvation in Christ that is “ready to be revealed” (1:5)—all of this based firmly in the promises of the Old Testament—could provide material for a rich series of Advent sermons, perhaps using as a theme the provocative notion that believers in Christ have been given news better than anything available to the angels (1:12).

A happy by-product of such a series would be the opportunity to read and preach through the entire letter, applying Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s observations that, rightly understood, “there is no difference between a Bible study and a sermon” and that the preacher should “educate the congregation to follow the sermon with opened Bibles.”¹ Indeed, using the (entire) book to structure a sermon series would provide an opportunity to encourage hearers to study the letter, either at home or in groups, as part of their Advent preparation for Christmas. The pastor could provide materials for such study, her own or published study guides.

There is, in my opinion, another significant value of Advent preaching from 1 Peter. This letter announces the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies in a way that renders quite impossible our occasional tendency to tame the promises by turning them into a kind of feel-good Christian cheerleading. See the promises! See Jesus! The fulfillment is self-evident, and, happy us, we’re the ones who get it right! What is lost in this is the shocking audacity of the claim made by the New Testament and the challenge it thereby sets before the hearers: If indeed the messianic claim for Jesus is correct, perhaps then so are the claims of the messianic kingdom. Where are all the plowshares? Where is the peaceable kingdom? Where is the law written on our hearts and the righteous living that follows? To be sure, the kingdom is God’s work, not ours, but there is no theological correctness that prohibits our cooperation in God’s project. First Peter helps in this with his insistence that, because God’s grace is being revealed in Christ, we followers of Christ are called to holy living, both in our private and public lives, in ways that can transform the present age (see especially the article in this issue by Marc Kolden).

A possible four-part series, using the book as a whole, could look like this:

Where the Angels Long to Look

To salvation promised (1:1–25)

To salvation revealed (2:1–10)

¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Worldly Preaching: Lectures on Homiletics*, ed. and trans. Clyde E. Fant (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 129.

To salvation lived (2:11–3:12)

To salvation hoped (3:13–4:19 [5:1–14])

In a sermon on Deut 29:29, Gerhard von Rad wonders at the fact that we Christians are invited to God's table, seated alongside the great prophets, where we "may even speak of their limited knowledge of salvation, if [we] promise not to do so peevishly, but rather in amazement that God has shown [us] things that were still hidden from them."² First Peter speaks similarly to his own audience, marveling that they have been shown things "into which the angels long to look!" Our task as preachers is to make that announcement, as does 1 Peter, in ways that maintain its surprise, retain its humility, and set forth the incredible claim it lays upon us.

Thus, in this proposed series we will speak first of *salvation promised*, confidently proclaiming that Isaiah's word that endures forever is nothing other than the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ (1:24–25)—but reminding our hearers that the promise of Isa 40 is brought about through the suffering of God's servant and God's servant people, both in the book of Isaiah and in 1 Peter, a suffering that believers are called to share. Suffering need not be sought; it will come with faithful obedience.

Second, we rejoice in *salvation revealed*, announcing Jesus, the stone the builders rejected, as the cornerstone chosen and precious (2:6–7). Again, the Old Testament promises call us to be a chosen race, but with the realization that, for Israel, to be chosen meant to be set apart as a blessing to others. What will it mean that we are chosen for the sake of others rather than for our own sakes?

Third, we are called to a *salvation lived*, so that others may see and glorify God in us (2:11–12). Now we consider once again what it means to be "aliens and exiles" when the birthday of our Lord has become the holy feast day of consumerism. Withdraw from the world altogether, consigning it to Satan? Too easy, and a move that requires us to jettison huge chunks of Scripture. But if our Christmas looks like everyone else's, who will find Christ in us? Working in the congregation with the household codes here will require considerable care, but help is available in articles that follow by Jeannine Brown and Mary Schertz.

Finally, we remember that ours is a *salvation hoped*—not a salvation owned—and that, though living in hope (3:15), we share the very suffering of Christ (4:12–19), returning again to that theme. Again, care will be needed to avoid the pitfalls of masochism on the one hand and cheap grace on the other. But that's what preachers are for!

At Christmas, we are reunited with the angels, looking together into the cradle of our Savior. And we all sing. Proper Advent preparation will help us find the tune.

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²Gerhard von Rad, *Predigten* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1972) 86; my translation.