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"TEXTS IN CONTEXT"

The Matthean Advent Gospels

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In a culture of immediate satisfaction, a season of waiting can only be a conundrum. In a way of life that exalts self-affirmation, a time of repentance can only last as long as the morning after. If Advent is going to be anything more than a change of liturgical colors and the weekly ceremonies of resplendent wreaths, everything depends on this: that the One who is to come appear in our preaching with power to create anticipation, evoke repentance, and grace the hearer with a new future.

The odds against this seem overwhelming. Even Leo Straus, the patron saint of the neo-conservative movement, noticed the correlation between the skepticism of the enlightenment and the development of the free market economy. The sons of the merchant class (no daughters need apply!) did intellectually what their fathers had done technologically or politically, attacking the religious impediments to rapacious, laissez-faire capitalism. A couple of centuries later, the Chamber of Commerce so controls the anticipations of Christmas that the church has to struggle to stay in contention for the leftovers.

What is more, the methodologies of the enlightenment have laid such a pervasive claim to exegesis that the texts themselves seem to offer no possibility of offsetting power. If there is going to be anything to Advent, it will be something moving in the pastor or in a particular approach to the season; according to currently dominant assumptions, the texts can hardly be expected to be anything more than they are: ancient testimonies in need of some assistance to come into contact with a vastly superior modern world.

What if one were to make a more primitive, pre-enlightenment assumption?

What if the power of the text is within the text itself, or moving through it actually to effect what it tells or describes? What if the coming One is ultimately, in the hiddenness of human speech and liturgical routine, the actual speaker? What would happen if the texts assigned to the Advent season constituted the address of a power which is, even now, bearing in on both preacher and hearers to prepare for its arrival?

If such an assumption were to be made, the whole season of Advent would turn over. Anticipation and repentance would take on an entirely different cast, being animated and driven by the impending arrival. Instead of picking amongst the leftovers, griping about the leavings of an unconstrained cultural empire, the preacher would have a word to tell, a word filled with the spirit of the crucified and risen One.

Is such an assumption justified? According to the rules of this kind of thinking, there is

only one who can answer: the One who was, who is, and who is to come. But the assumption itself, as a presupposition for proceeding, is accessible. And so are the Advent texts. So here follows a survey.

First Sunday in Advent: Matthew 24:37-44 or Matthew 21:1-11

The gospel texts assigned as alternatives for the first Sunday of the new church year illustrate compellingly the cooled eschatology of the Catholic tradition. Matthew 24:37-44, a text commonly abused by the rapture-ists ("one will be taken and another left"), and Matthew 21:1-11 set out an admonition to watchfulness and the story of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Each of them takes a slice of the church's anticipation, either portraying something of its nature or giving a picture of how Christ enters, but neither sets out the whole loaf. Thus the anticipation of the season is already in some sense undermined: the question "For what?" or "For whom?" remains unaddressed.

The eschatology of the New Testament itself begins elsewhere: with the resurrection. For the first Christians, Easter was never simply the revivification of the dead Jesus. Rather, it was—as it is—a radical redistribution of power. Raised from the dead, Jesus has broken through the bindings with which the powers of the present age—death, sin, the evil one—have enshrouded this period to exercise their control. As such, Jesus' triumph over death is no isolated victory. It signals the death of death, the beginning of a new creation in which those powers which run amuck in the old are themselves bound, like the strong man whose house is being plundered (Mark 3:27f.).

So the gifts which have been individualized and denatured in cultural Christianity have far deeper connotations in the original eschatology. Forgiveness of sin is not merely therapeutic accommodation to the inevitable disappointments of a selfhood running out of control, it is the current form of the resurrection, opening both self and community to the freedom of life lived beyond condemnation, in grace. The resurrection of the dead is not merely a restoration to selfhood on the other side of the grave, but being raised with Christ in a new and restored creation, one in which the conditioning force is the love of Christ now realized beyond contention. Deliverance from the devil is thus not only support in the face of the grasping dreads of temptations aimed at the grounds of selfhood, but release into a realm where Christ rules in unrivaled sovereignty. In Christ, God has spoken the last word, one in which the creation has been and is now being reclaimed.

This eschatological expectation is evident in some of the best known passages of the New Testament: Phil 2:5-11, the great Christ hymn, or 1 Cor 15:20-27, 51-58. It is the hope of the early church. And whenever it has broken out again in the history of the church, at the time of the reformation, for example, or in the dialectical theology of the early twentieth century, it has invariably revitalized and reoriented the church's life and proclamation.

But it has to be said that this apocalyptic, with its white-hot expectation and revolutionary implications, has had a tough time finding a home in the more staid, controlled, and controlling traditions of the church. So eschatology has become a matter of the last things, left to the last. And then watchfulness, as in 2 Peter and the lectionary, becomes one virtue among others for Christians to cultivate in themselves.

Whichever text is selected for Advent 1, the key to preaching it is to supply the underlying assumption from the original New Testament community. It is the Lord who is coming, the One who, raised from the dead, has been revealed as the pantocrator. It is the certainty of his coming that brings the faithful to their tiptoes; it is the joy of his arrival that suggests a parallel to the entry into Jerusalem at Palm Sunday.

No doubt, the impending coming of Christ can be taken as threat, as it is in Matt 24:37-44. To the Chamber of Commerce, for example, with its continual search for ever greater orgasms of consumption in the Christmas season, the arrival of this One would have all the joy of the appearance of the mother-in-law or father-in-law. But in Matthew's text, something different has happened. The raucous waiting of the Corinthians and the eager anticipation of the Thessalonians has been replaced with the resignation of a community apparently grown inured to delay. Their yawning boredom at the prospect of a longer wait signals their need to be recharged. As so often happens, this recharge comes negatively: "you'll be surprised," "he'll be here in a minute," "he'll come when your back is turned, just like a thief," etc.

It is true, of course. Our waiting, so casual now that it could hardly qualify as such, does need recharge. And the implicit threat of Christ's return, in which he will steal all the initiatives we have so confidently abrogated to ourselves, does need to become explicit at points. But it is the One who is to come who fires hope, who heats expectation, whose gifts inspire anticipation. Christ is coming, and when he gets here it is the graves that will suffer the deepest robbery, the law that will be deprived of its claims, and the evil one who will stand empty-handed. "Watch and wait; and if you've got something to lose, you better be ready. Because by the time he's done, every initiative will be in his hands."

The Palm Sunday text, now assigned to Advent, has been removed from its original New Testament context and given a different liturgical purpose. To preach it exegetically on Advent 1, with no Good Friday or Easter texts to follow, is to leave the hearer hanging. The implied assumption of those who framed the lectionary is typological: just as Christ came into Jerusalem, so he will come in the end.

Again, this may be appropriate. In fact, there is even a basis for speaking of the joy of his return here: the crowds received him gladly, adorning his way with garlands—when Christ comes, we expect to meet him in the same way. But here

again, there is something missing: Christ entered Jerusalem to go to his death; he is returning to reassert his cosmic claims to power. It is this restoration of the creation under Christ's lordship which makes the parallel to Palm Sunday worth considering, even if the text's own frame of reference would have to be changed.

Second Sunday in Advent: Matthew 3:1-12

John the Baptist is so much the prophet of Advent that the one is inseparable from the other. But as predictable as his appearance in this season may be, it is nevertheless jarring, for John brings with him one of the most difficult challenges of the contemporary pulpit: preaching repentance, as in Matt 3:1-12.

The cheap stuff isn't that tough. There's never been any lack of moral outrage; commonly, neither is there insufficient basis for it. If repentance were merely regret or

remonstrance, a passing sorrow over personal failings of the self and others, all that would be necessary to such preaching would be some clever packaging: a little self-discipline will make Christmas all the more enjoyable, if only people would return to old-fashioned values, etc.

But, of course, John isn't interested in such a little bit, and neither is Jesus—not even if inflation brings it to the levels of self-flagellation. Repentance is a correlate of freedom. The tearing away that takes places in detachment is only possible because a deeper, more powerful and superior attachment has come: the attachment of faith, the grip of the kingdom.

Luther and his friends in Wittenberg generally made a distinction between passive and active contrition. Passive contrition is a sorrow worked in us by events and conditions of daily life which call our sense of control or safety, the presence of alternatives, into question. It is what happens to a lot of pastors when they think of the annual meeting. Active contrition is a contrition which we work in ourselves, as we attempt to extricate ourselves from inappropriate connections that bind us but that, for the most part, we also desire and enjoy. Not surprisingly, the reformers had a lot more confidence in the passive than the active—we're usually not willing to consider alternatives until there isn't one.

But now John the Baptist calls us to an active examination of ourselves and the conditions of life in which we live. How can this happen? What would it take for preacher and parishioners actually to experience the repentance, and thus the freedom, of Advent?

Luther would have two suggestions. First, if active contrition is going to be something more than hypocrisy, it has to begin where we are actually getting had: in those circumstances where our sense of self-sufficiency is being challenged. Repentance begins as we are dislodged, driven out from under the cover of the routines and rituals in which we shelter ourselves from the ultimate. So John the Baptist went after the dodge of his hearers: "Do not say to yourselves, 'We are children of Abraham, we are children of Abraham.' God is able to raise up from these stones children of Abraham." He sought the point where the cover was being torn off and exposed it.

But secondly, if there is going to be real repentance in Luther's understanding, the law has to be joined by the gospel. A pheasant driven out of a covert will desperately seek another; a person forced to face the raw winds of exposure will dive for the nearest shelter. If the gospel doesn't overlap the law at the point of conflict, declaring the true safety or cover given in Christ, there will be no repen-

tance but simple remorse or rebellion. Good money drives out bad; the true comfort of the gospel exposes all substitutes as counterfeit.

This is the difference between the repentance of John and Jesus and between their baptisms as well. John's is the repentance of preparation, a detachment undertaken by the self for the sake of that which is to come; Jesus' repentance is a reflex of the gospel, a detachment that is the result of his attachment to us in grace. John's baptism is a baptism of anticipation, performed to signify the expectation of something new; Jesus' baptism purges like a fire the former means to self-fulfillment because the Spirit has made all thought of such self-seeking irrelevant, as foolish as going to bed alone after the wedding has been celebrated.

So in preaching Matt 3:1-12, two things must happen: the exposure of the old coverts, the former hiding places, has to be announced, and then the gospel, the safety of the coming One, must be declared. John the Baptist, and Christ behind him, are tearing you away from all of the

false investments, the mistaken priorities of self-consumption so that, under the sovereign attachment won for you in Christ and bestowed on you through the Spirit, you might live in the freedom of the kingdom.

Third Sunday in Advent: Matthew 11:2-11

John's fate is linked to his Lord's. So, having heard him sounding forth in the desert the radical freedom of detachment, we find him now doubly attached—in prison, yet held even more firmly by the One whom he has proclaimed (Matt 11:2-11).

This is what happens to preachers of repentance, as Jesus points out. If nature hates a vacuum, the human heart won't stand for anything even close. So those who call the self's false attachments—the immortality projects, the idolatries, the myths of choice and consumption—into question generally have to pay their own bills. The quickest way to safety, back under cover, is to attack the one who has done the uncovering: the preacher gets it; the prophet has prophecy's reward. Having failed social meteorology and fabric softening, John is in prison. Soon his head won't be worth any more than the passing titillations of a virgin's immodest dance.

It is no wonder John must ask, "Are you he who is to come or shall we look for another?" No matter what he may have known previously, his own future has now come into question and so have his hopes.

In Jesus' answer, we finally get to see the real muscle of Advent: the blind, the lame, the leper, the deaf, the dead, the poor, those who have been the victims of this age and its dreadful powers, are restored by the One whose goal it is to reclaim the whole creation. And the victims are joined by those who have not surrendered to death and its minions, who "take no offense" at this glorious restoration.

This hope propels Advent and is the drive of the church's witness. In Christ, God has decided that things are not going to go on like this, the rich taking it out of the backs of the poor, the strong relying on the disadvantage of the weak or impaired to perpetuate their illusions of superiority. The new age has already begun in the One who is to come, the One who has already arrived and will yet come. So the balance will be restored: creation will become creation again, the forces of chaos being routed. The age of grace has dawned, the time in which all things will be made new.

Characteristically, however, having declared this hope, Jesus protects it from the enthusiasm that undid it in communities like Corinth. The resurrection does not annul the cross; the hope of Christ's ultimate victory does not immunize us against loss. "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence" (v. 12): the powers of this age and those who have benefited by them are not simply going to surrender. In this age, the sign of fidelity is the cross. It takes shape in lives of hope lived in the midst of all that contradicts it. A Christian's destiny is linked to Christ's, just as John the Baptist's was: "But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed" (1 Pet 4:15). There is no other way.

Fourth Sunday in Advent: Matthew 1:18-25

Christmas is upon us, at least in its Matthean version (1:18-25). The improbable

combination of Luke's account, mixing the purity of angels with the godlessness of shepherds, is missing here. Instead, there is something even more improbably likely: the hope of all the earth takes shape under the sign of arrangements being made for a betrothal apparently violated. It is just like the God who creates out of nothing and raises the dead to carry on in this way: to hide the gifts of grace and sovereignty in the midst of what appears tawdry and happenstance.

The story is particular enough to be offensive. Going by the customs of the time, Mary was probably just out of puberty—14 or 15 at the most. Like countless other young women, before or since, she has turned up pregnant before the wedding. The best explanation, then as now, is the oldest one: whether out of curiosity or adolescent rebellion, she had given herself prematurely. Knowing that he is not the father, Joseph is going to do the right thing and take a quiet out.

This is a long way from the exuberant hopes set forth in Advent 3. Sublime expectation of a cosmic reversal of fortunes is here linked to the most common kind of predicament: an apparently illegitimate child, the product of a private, unratified passion. The One who is to come is branded from the beginning as the one who came too early: a bastard child, "born of fornication," as his critics in John's gospel so infelicitously implied with their decorous insult (John 8:41).

"Found to be with child of the Holy Spirit," the text says (v. 9). By whom, one wonders. Certainly not by the Jews of John 8; surely not by the neighbor women and not by Joseph either, who was preparing to depart. For all of them there was a more reasonable explanation, so compelling any other alternative seemed preposterous.

Yet the angel of Joseph's dream, running the risk of being considered yet another fiction, makes a startling claim for this child: "You shall call him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (v. 21). Hope arises here under the sign of its opposite. For the promise of forgiveness is once more, in the biblical apocalyptic, far more than bourgeois therapeutic self-acceptance—the resignation to futility. It is the declaration of a new future, a future granted now not merely as the consequence of the past but under the control of One who can literally grace it. To be forgiven is to receive a future that is under the control not of the previous failure or offense, but which is in the hands of One who can actually effect a new condition. Forgiveness breaks the simple link between cause and effect, action and reaction, failure and disaster, rebellion and resentment or recrimination. Forgive-

ness inserts a new condition upon which the future stands. It is Jesus' trademark, his very identity, that he bestows such a gift.

On the strength of the angel's claim, the church asserts one of its own: from the beginning, it was always God's intention that it should happen this way. It is the fulfillment of the ancient prophecy, Matthew declares (v. 22): the hope of all the ages, the beginning of the end of all the old tyrannies, the restoration of everything that is and will be, was always meant to take place in a virgin's belly, in a manger, at the cross.

That is Advent. It is a time of expectation and repentance, fired by the declaration that in the Lord's good time Christ appeared, taking hold of all time to unfold it according to his purpose. So we await his coming, ears cocked amidst the rowdy cries of the delight and disappointments of conspicuous consumption. This One will not disappoint you or your people, but tearing you free, will open up a new world.