



The Gospel Texts for Advent (Series B)*

WENDELL DEBNER

Minnesota Consortium of Theological Schools, St. Paul, Minnesota

The Advent season can be a meaningful and poignant time, an occasion to reflect on our values and sense of purpose. The darkness of the winter solstice reminds us of the limitations of light and life. In the midst of holiday preparation and sales campaigns, the Advent season is an appropriate time to remember the incarnation and God’s promise to return.

If a preacher wishes to develop a series of sermons for Advent, three themes are found in all of the four Series B gospel texts. These are: (1) the Trinity, (2) the activity of the Holy Spirit, and (3) the meaning of time.

Although sermons about the nature of the Trinity are notorious for their “Morpheus effect,” recent theological explorations offer exciting, new perspectives on the triune God. Jürgen Moltmann, for example, calls us to a new appreciation of the God who is revealed and described in Scripture.¹ A particular philosophical tradition about God’s nature has heavily influenced western theological thought: we talk of God as all knowing, unchanging, almighty, and supreme substance. Moltmann argues that this paradigm is dissonant with the biblical portrayal of God. There God’s name is a verb, and God is active, suffering, incarnate and involved with humankind through a dynamic relationship. Moltmann suggests

*This article was written after a conversation with Professor David Fredrickson, Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, Pastor Paul Ofstedal, St. Anthony Park Lutheran Church, St. Paul, MN, and Pastor Leslie Svenson, St. John’s Lutheran Church, Northfield, MN.

¹Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

that we can learn of God through our human experience of community and the Spirit’s activity in our lives. God’s entry into this world through the incarnation and the divine promises for the future reveal a God active through history on behalf of God’s people on earth.

As an illustration, we might consider that loving human relationships are characterized by flexibility, elasticity, and dialogue. They are marked with the dynamic of constant adaptation. Long-term marriages and parent-child relationships illustrate how we define roles and negotiate our identities with each other.

Moltmann conceives of a dynamic faith relationship with God in a similar fashion. Influenced by change, context, and the passage of time, faith is dynamic and marked by a lively give and take.

In the second of the three suggested Advent themes, a preacher will find that the Holy

Spirit is prominently mentioned in all four of the Advent texts. The first gospel lesson, Mark 13:33-37, is a parable that calls us to be watchful and constantly alert to the signs of God's activity and presence. The second week's reading (cf. Mark 1:8) reminds us that Jesus will baptize with the Spirit. In the third gospel, John 1:6-8, 19-28, we read that the Spirit spoke through the prophets, especially through John, who prepared the way for Jesus. In the last text, Luke 1:26-38, the Spirit comes upon Mary in the story of the annunciation.

If a preacher wants to center the listener's thoughts on the meaning of time, these four texts offer deep insight into the holy history of God's involvement in our world. The parable of the traveling housemaster who tells his stewards to care for his property is a reminder that we are to watch and make good use of God's gifts. Mark 1:1-8 and John 1 help us to understand how Jesus came in the fullness of time to bring us a new age. In these texts we are also introduced to the last and greatest of the prophets, who stands between the old and new covenants. In the story of the annunciation, we are reminded that the birth of Jesus brings in the new kingdom, a concept rooted in time. Surely our relationship with God is within the framework of time.

First Sunday in Advent: Mark 13:33-37

If a preacher is developing a theme relating to God's activity in time, it would seem essential to include all of Mark 13, often called the "little apocalypse" because of its vision of impending judgment. The creator will someday intervene in human history with terrible destruction. But Christians are not to live without hope, for the promised Son of Man will come in the clouds with great power (v. 26). Verse 32 is particularly pertinent, if not puzzling, if the preacher plans to speak about the Trinity. Not even the Son knows the hour of the end. What does that signal about the nature of the Trinity?

The primary word in the text is "Watch" (vv. 34, 37, and 38). Our challenge is to stay alert throughout the long, dark night when we are normally asleep and unguarded. Advent was the Christian response to the pagan rites of the winter solstice. The primitive Christian community was undoubtedly aware of many interpretations of darkness and the need for watchfulness. The doorkeeper, who is

a symbol of the night watch, is a reminder of our need to be alert. In this case watchfulness is a community activity, as individuals cooperate to take the responsibility for certain watches. This watchfulness relates to the eschaton. Some theologians would assert that the death of Jesus is the eschaton embodied or realized. More frequently, the eschaton refers to the return of Jesus at the end of time. Our hope centers in the One who has promised to return to forgive sins and raise the dead. Regardless of the preacher's approach, the warnings to watch refer to the impending, dramatic activity of God who is bringing in the fullness of God's kingdom (see 1 Cor 15:25-26 and Rev 21:1-5).

If even Jesus does not know the day or the hour, may we assume that his knowledge of God is embedded within time? God surely rules time and God has chosen it as an important vehicle for self-disclosure.

It is intriguing that the servants in the text are called slaves, which may reflect the writer's desire to depict the servants' accountability. Yet, the text makes an odd combination: the humble slaves are given great responsibility and authority. In a similar fashion, we who are beggars

before the throne of God are given a very high authority and trust: God's mission on this earth. This oxymoron, slave and yet ruler of God's gifts, could describe our vocation. We are entrusted with an authority in our life's work, and yet we are the slaves of God and servants of our neighbors.

Part of our calling, our vocation, is to be awake and to watch for Jesus who will come again in glory. There seem to be two distinct functions for the servants. One is that of doorkeeper, keeping the vigil, while the other relates to carrying out particular duties. The latter is a reminder of our distinctive vocations and how household members cooperate for the good of all. Each one has his or her duty, yet we are interdependent.

Preaching Themes

"Wait, Watch, and Work!" The waiting is assumed in the text. We wait for Jesus, and underlying our watchfulness is our confidence in the promise. Our understanding of both waiting and working is based on hopeful assumptions. We serve joyfully, not out of fear or dread, for the Jesus who is to come is not a stranger to us, but the Jesus whom we now know and love.

Another theme might be: "Servants with Authority." Here a preacher might work with a description of *doulos*, and *exousia*, servant and authority. In Greek the word for authority means literally "out of being." Why do we have authority? Because we find our being in Christ.

We have a noble calling. We are to watch and work as a daily vocation. We have a global calling (v. 10), and we have been commanded to love the world as God's creation. All of this is in significant contrast to those who look at the world with disdain and do not share God's passion for the material things of this earth. "Work" could be translated as "function" in v. 34, which would give a slightly different turn to our understanding of the sentence.

Good workers do not waste time looking at the clock; they are engrossed and directed toward their duties. There is an interesting tension in the text, relating to how those who work diligently depend on the person watching at the door. The watcher is alert for all, and if the watcher fails to sound the alarm at the appropriate time, all may perish. These themes relate nicely to the Isaiah lesson assigned with this gospel.

Second Sunday in Advent: Mark 1:1-8

The core and heart of Mark are quickly addressed in the first chapter. Mark intends to tell us the good news about Jesus Christ (v. 1). John's activity signals the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and the beautiful poem in vv. 2-3 connects John to Isaiah who predicted the coming of a forerunner. The flow of the pericope might lead through v. 11; it seems difficult to stop in the middle of talk about baptism and not read the story about Jesus' baptism.

There is an important reference to the baptism of water and the Holy Spirit in v. 8. Christ's baptism is something more than John's, and a preacher may wish to remind people that Jesus' baptism means forgiveness and new life and the presence of God's Spirit.

Verses 8, 10, and 11 are significant in the church's portrayal of the Holy Trinity. In the theophany the Father is represented by the voice, the son by Jesus in the Jordan, and the Spirit is poured out in the baptism. What is the uniqueness of Jesus and his baptism? These are trinitarian issues.

John's baptism is a purifying rite. Uncleanness refers to a disordered creation, but the Holy Spirit makes a new and pure creation. John the Baptist announces that God is coming to us in Jesus to take our sin and dirt upon himself, to redeem us and give us the assurance of a new creation. Notice that in v. 10 the heavens are torn, destroying the barrier between God and us. God comes to us ending our separation. God's Son provides a way for us to be pure before God in order that we might approach God in prayer and live in a loving relationship.

Here we have deep insight into the extent of God's love. God takes pleasure in loving us and being with us. God is not a philosophical ideal who is complete in God's self, aloof in heaven. In contrast to this distant God, the new creation implies immanence because the Holy Spirit dwells in us.

...the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.²

Certainly this new creation means that God dwells with us incarnationally. 1 Cor 15:28 reminds us that God desires to be all things and in all things.

This new creation conveys a sense of God's residence with humanity. If a preacher wishes to focus on this train of thought, vv. 9-11 should be included in the pericope. Certainly the content of v. 4 relates to the information in vv. 9-11.

John the Baptist represents the essence of Advent, but for all his prominence,

²Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," in *Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford/New York: Oxford University, 1986) 128.

his identity seems foreign to us. Yet the Baptist represents the coming of the new creation and the transition between the ages.

Preaching Themes

"God's New Creation" or "God's Exchange" might serve as themes. Luther frequently spoke of the miraculous exchange, that is, everything that is true about Christ is true about me, and everything that is true about me is true about Christ. I become pure and spotless, and Jesus becomes sin. How is this possible? Through Christ, this miraculous exchange is possible, and it describes what is at the heart of redemption.

"Fearless Self Examination" could focus on John and his role in holy history. A preacher could deal with the relationships within the Trinity and the incarnation of God. Sometimes Christians think of God the Father as judge, and Jesus as advocate, forgetting that the Son is sent because of the Father's love.

Listeners vary, and a pastor knows that he or she speaks to all types of people in a sermon, some of whom feel dirty or sinful or ashamed. John knew that we cannot deny our sin, fail to face our corrupt nature, or superficially excuse ourselves. No, we are to die to sin and trust in Christ who calls us forth as a new creation. Only a new birth can remedy the sinful condition of our brokenness and corruption.

Why do people attend worship? Presumably they come to hear the gospel, to deal with their sinfulness, and find new hope and meaning for their lives. They want to hear the truth, not a

message from a cheerleader who is out of touch with the human struggle. John calls us to give our sinfulness to the Lamb of God who can do something about it.

Third Sunday in Advent: John 1:6-8, 19-28

In this classic Advent text the Pharisees and other leaders of the Jewish community are curious about John's identity. After the gospel writer places the event in the context of his "light and darkness" theme (vv. 7-8), he allows the Baptist to identify himself.

Several themes seem prominent in the pericope itself. "Facing our Sinfulness" might deal with the question of how one becomes pure. In v. 24 we find that the Pharisees have sent messengers to ask the credential question. They are the representatives of those who are concerned about how one may become pure before God.

It is helpful to note that early Christians were expelled from the synagogues and were therefore excluded from the traditional Jewish purification rites. In the early church, Christians believed that God purified them through the Lamb of God, the body and blood of Jesus. This was a theological understanding which filled the void caused by their exclusion from the synagogue.

For John, Jesus is the one who will now purify sinners. This theme is particularly evident in the two verses following the pericope where Jesus is identified as the Lamb of God. In these verses the preacher has the heart of the gospel: God has sent Jesus who will atone for the sins of the world.

Preaching Themes

One theme flows from the drama of the story itself. The Jewish leadership missed a great opportunity. They came with openness and urgent questions, questions that were appropriate and even responsible. They also came with previous assumptions, certain boxes for the truth. John and Jesus do not fit the boxes, but the messengers did not have the courage or the openness to rethink their assumptions.

We too have our categories, our schemes of things. If God acts in a way that does not harmonize with these assumptions, it is difficult for us to hear the new thing. It seems, however that Jesus always acts in surprising ways. For instance, we might think of the offense of the gospel: Jesus, God's son, dies. Our preconceptions, assumptions, and paradigms about God can prevent us from embracing the crucified Jesus.

We are constantly renegotiating our relationship with God much as the early faith community had to renegotiate its identity after being excluded from the Jewish synagogue and its attendant rites, traditions, symbols, and theology. J. Louis Martyn argues that Jesus is God, an uncontrollable person in relationship with us.³

Fourth Sunday in Advent: Luke 1:26-38

In the text there are two distinctive understandings of the term "Son of God." First there is a royal theme: Jesus is the son of David, and God will make him a king (v. 32). Second, Jesus is a powerless child of a humble mother, a theme which has deeper, trinitarian significance.

Luke begins his Gospel by portraying Jesus in royal language, but this royal person is later crucified. The theological question is obvious: Is the death of Jesus a mistake or is it a part of God's kingship? Scholars remind us that Luke is most likely written to upper-class people,

those who were influential and powerful, and accustomed to dealing with the aristocracy. Perhaps he selected these themes because they were familiar to his readers. In any event, Luke redefines authority and kingship through Jesus' story, and this redefinition should affect our vocation as followers of our new-born king.

Preaching Themes

While the focal point of the text is the advent of Jesus, Mary certainly comes across as an interesting and amazing person. She says, "Let it be with me according to your word." The following sonnet comes to mind:

Thy will be done. I yield up everything.
"The life is more than meat"—then more than health;
"The body more than raiment"—then than wealth;
The hairs I made not, thou art numbering.
Thou art my life—I the brook, thou the spring.

³James Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968). Martyn does a historical reconstruction of the faith community in relationship to the Jewish synagogue.

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Because thine eyes are open, I can see;
Because thou art thyself, 'tis therefore I am me.⁴

Mary understood that God was her life; her faith and trust made her a great theologian. She was troubled, perplexed, and she pondered what happened. All of these reactions are the marks of a good theologian.

We must be careful not to use the text as a template for the role of women, and advocate humility, obedience, and submissiveness as exclusively feminine ideals. We do better to understand this text as a new creation story, as Paul Ofstedal does when he connects this text with Genesis 1:1-2:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The Spirit of God moved over the face of the waters. God's Spirit moved over the young virgin matter of creation, to bring forth life and light. God brought forth from that young virgin matter beauty, order and even people. Every created thing reflected the harmony of the heart of God for all the world to know and praise. In Luke we see God's Spirit again moving over the young virgin Mary, to bring forth life and light. The Spirit hovered mysteriously over Mary to bring through her the gift of a new creation to us as well.⁵

Mary's trust is impressive. She recognizes the Spirit of God and joyfully reacts. Perhaps we should look about our world and our congregations and see the life-changing Spirit of God moving and breathing in our midst. May this be our Advent prayer: "I am a servant of the Lord; I see God's work being done. Help me to be faithful."

Another preaching theme might be, "Do Not be Afraid." Mary had her questions and

fears, but she was ready to take the risk with God, living with an openness to God's creative work. One might introduce v. 37 as well, assuring the listeners that God can do all things. Another nuance of this theme might develop from the comment that the Spirit of God remained, even though the angel departed (see v. 38).

Luke's is a fascinating Gospel. The definition of power developed in the book addresses our current contextual and vocational struggles. There is a clear tension between serving and ruling in Luke. Luke gives us a vision of the kingdom of God, which is ruled by a crucified messiah, not a typical king.

If our Advent observations can include meaningful reflections about the Advent gospels, this busy and dark season of the year can be a time of growth and preparation for the coming of our Savior.

⁴George MacDonald, *Diary of an Old Soul* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1965) 11.

⁵Paul Ofstedal (Unpublished homily on Luke 1:26-38).

WENDELL DEBNER is director of the Doctor of Ministry program for the Minnesota Consortium of Theological Schools.