

The Cry for Advent

sermon digest

November 27, 2011

Isaiah 64:1-9

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The *Revised Common Lectionary* is a selection of scripture readings for each Sunday of the Christian year. Some Churches and denominations assign these readings and the liturgy for each Sunday. Many pastors of churches from free liturgical traditions choose to follow the Lectionary for the sake of ecumenical cooperation. Some fifteen years ago my church decided to use the adult Bible study literature produced by a new publishing house Smyth and Helwys, named for the first English Baptist pastors. In this Free Church tradition, Smyth and Helwys chose to follow the Lectionary for the selection of scripture passages for adult study. The first year, and every year thereafter, I had a visit from one of my favorite teachers Ruth Cates Baird. The problem was Advent. For the most part, Miss Baird had no problem with the Lectionary passages; but the select scriptures for Advent from both the Old and New Testaments always were on Apocalyptic messages of the Bible related to the conclusion of history, the Second Coming of Christ, or what is often billed as “the end of the world.” Miss Baird rebelled. She wanted nothing to do with that theme at this time of the year. Advent was supposed to get us ready for Christmas. What possible connection could be made of putting the end at the beginning of the Christian year? After several years of protest, in total exasperation, she decided to photocopy one of my old sermons each year for her class to substitute for the Lectionary lesson.

I must confess my failure to convince Miss Baird of the justification for looking at the end time on the first Sunday of Advent. I noted that Advent means “coming” and begins with the People of God from Hebrew and Christian scriptures gazing at the heavens longing for the coming of God to earth. But in the background the wild images of Daniel and Revelation always presented problem views of history long before Smyth and Helwys came along; and, like many other pastors of both ancient and modern times, I tended to tiptoe around them. The *Left Behind* novels of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins sensationalized and distorted biblical Apocalyptic, and Hal Lindsey’s *Late Great Planet Earth* predicting the end of the world in the 1980’s was more fictitious than the novels. Truth be told, economic, military, and natural disasters have always tended to produce speculation about the end time; and no one can argue that the last decade of history has produced sufficient threats from wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, and floods to justify the Apocalyptic longing for the coming of God.

This morning I would like to try again to find a meaningful basis for the Lectionary tradition on Advent I. If she were still with us, I believe that Ruth Cates could also worship with us, listening to the cry for Advent from Second Isaiah, the prophet of God who followed the Exile.

Hope rises from the ashes of despair. If we can set aside for the moment our justified prejudice against end-time speculations, we might be able to see the connection of our times with the historical conditions that produced Jewish Apocalyptic. When all hope for human solutions to world problems seemed to disappear, the Jews resorted to Apocalyptic. The word means “uncovered,” revelation, from which the final book of our Canon is named. In times of despair, Apocalyptic looked for God to act, to break into history, to establish justice in the land, and to direct us to an era of peace. In good times, like most of us, the Jews did not long for God to fix the problems of the earth; they, like we, were confident of political or military solutions. Foxhole religion has been around for many centuries and is still the basic motivation for people to cry out to God. So, in a sense, Apocalyptic was nothing more than foxhole religion writ large. Beyond the personal cry for help, Apocalyptic was a national hope for a global transformation.

The Lectionary text from Isaiah must be understood in historical context. In 586 BCE, the Babylonians swept down from the north, captured Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and forced a march to Babylon of a select group of prisoners, resembling the “trail of tears” of the Cherokee nation in our own national history. The Exiles became servants to their captors. They were uprooted from their homes and separated from the precious Land of Promise. The people who were left in Judea had to eat rats and dogs in order to survive. The word was *Exile*, the most radical event to date in Jewish history. The Prophets of the Exile repeatedly connected the pain with punishment. This was the judgment of God on the sins of the people. The suffering had to make sense, and the only rational explanation available was the anger of God.

After fifty years, King Cyrus allowed the Exiles to return home. They found the city walls of Jerusalem in a pile of rubble and their precious Temple in burned ruins. So this Isaiah rehearses the history and remembers the good times of God's favor and sounds a note of protest against the prolonged punishment of the people. Haven't they had enough? Just how much pain does God have to exact in order to establish justice? The cry for Advent is a plea for God to come down from heaven to earth. Only the coming of God cannot be a simple, natural flow of events. The only way the hidden God of the Jews is to be visible is by a breakthrough of the barriers that separate God from the people. So Isaiah cries: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence."

In the current issue of *Christian Century* (November 29) Barbara Brown Taylor sheds light on the darkness of Advent. She notes that in the Bible, darkness is the pits. Light stands for life and darkness, death. When God is angry, the people are plunged into darkness. Locusts darken the land. People grope in darkness. The Day of the Lord is darkness rather than light. John sums it up: "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all." She notes that we begin our Christian year when the days are getting darker, but darkness is necessary for the beginning of life. Seeds are planted in the darkness of the soil in order to sprout and grow. In imagery that is natural from a woman's point of view, she notes that babies are incubated in the darkness of the womb. Ideally they do not see the light of day until the child is fully formed. She concludes:

Here is a helpful reminder to all who fear the dark. Darkness does not come from a different place than light; it is not presided over by a different God. The long nights of Advent and the early mornings of Easter both point us toward the God for whom darkness and light are alike.

Both are fertile season for those who walk by faith and not by sight. (p. 37).

Indeed, the darkness is a real part of our world and our lives. If God is not Lord over the darkness as well as the light, our hope is incomplete.

William Willimon recalls a friend who was asked to preach in a megachurch with a television audience beyond the imagination of any preacher's wild dreams. He was given a few instructions: "People worship with us in order to feel good about themselves. Therefore, don't mention the cross in your sermon. And don't dwell too much on sin. And don't mention the John Birch Society." Second Isaiah could not stand in that pulpit. The cockeyed optimism demanded by the modern sales culture has to have a blind eye toward the funeral home, the hospital, the war zone, the hunger problem, and the victims of terror and political tyranny. But, until we are willing to face the darkness, we cannot begin to understand the in-breaking light of God on our land.

We, too, wait for Messiah. We sometimes forget that the Christian year cycles back to the same place every twelve months with a false picture of the way time moves. The Jews truly knew the difference. They rejected the Greek circle of time because they worshiped the God who created both time and space. Long before Einstein, they understood the relationship of time and space in the God who reaches from beginning to end and beyond.

The two Gospel narratives on the birth of Messiah are not all sweetness and light. They tell of a people who have been living in the darkness of the Roman conquest, people who have suffered and were suffering from inhumane economic burdens and a cruel government. They reflect on the ages of Jewish poverty and depression, days of Exile and alienation both from the Land and from the Promise. These were people who also knew cancer, birth defects, blindness, epilepsy, earthquakes, floods, and storms; and they wondered like we wonder, where is God in all of this? If God is real and if God cares, why doesn't this God of love and might come into our darkness and shed light? If the darkness cannot and will not be dispelled, perhaps it can be explained on a level that we can comprehend. Isaiah's cry is our cry for Advent: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence."

While we cycle again into the celebration of the coming of God in Christ, we long for the coming of God every bit as much as Isaiah. We can get cynical here and conclude that we celebrate something that never happened or something we really do not believe. We can also recognize that the hidden, invisible God of the Jews, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is far too big to fit our mold for god or our shortsighted need for quick, easy answers. The German mystic Gerhard Tersteegen wrote: "A

god understood, a god comprehended, is no god.” Once we have whittled god down to a size that fits our understanding, we have lost any vision that we might have had of the God of creation, the God of hope, who is about the business of finishing the new creation. Truly, our vision of God is a blurred image in a dim mirror, yet we wait for the time when we will see as we are seen and know as we are known.