

“Advent” by Pat Conover

2 December 2012

First Sunday of Advent

Advent is a strange season. On the one hand we are supposed to be waiting for something important and new to happen. On the other hand we are heading toward Christmas, perhaps the most shopworn celebration of the Christian year.

A standard theme for Advent preaching is “Rescue Christmas from Commercialism.” I’m going to preach that sermon now. “Don’t give in to commercialism. Don’t give into nostalgia. Christmas isn’t an excuse to give toys to children.” Okay, that is over with.

Another standard theme for Advent is that the birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecy in Hebrew Scripture. In today’s lectionary reading “Jeremiah twas foretold it...”

Jeremiah 33:14-16 (REB)

The days are coming, says the Lord, when I shall bestow on Israel and Judah all the blessings I have promised them. In those days, at that time, I shall make a righteous branch spring forth from David’s line; he will maintain law and justice in the land. In those days Judah will be kept safe and Jerusalem will live undisturbed. This will be the name given to him: The Lord our Righteousness.

Doesn’t work to good as predictive prophecy does it? Jesus didn’t maintain law and justice in the land. Judah wasn’t safe. Jesus was killed in Jerusalem and Jerusalem was headed for devastation and genocide, for the end of Judaism as a temple focused religion. Jesus was not called “The Lord our Righteousness.”

So here is my sermon on Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy.

Jesus was not the Messiah the Jews were looking for and most didn't buy in to Jesus as Messiah. Jesus upset Herod and the Temple priests who had gained the right to govern with Jewish law after centuries of war and diplomacy. Jesus was crucified as a terrorist sympathizer who threatened the fragile peace between Judah and Rome.

Another standard Advent theme for sermons is waiting in the darkness for the light that returns at Christmas, watching for a star at night to give mysterious guidance. I'm not too keen about the spiritual posture of waiting. We've already been given what we need for salvation here and now. It seems to me that our biggest spiritual challenge is spending too much time getting ready and not enough time getting going. And it isn't Jesus as a baby that gets me going but Jesus as an adult who wasn't waiting on anyone or anything. So here is my waiting in the darkness Advent sermon. Turn on your flashlight and see what is already going on.

I'm running out of standard themes for Advent sermons and it doesn't seem right to preach on the lectionary scripture from Luke's apocalypse since it presents an image of end times rather than a new beginning.

Fortunately, I found some inspiration in the Psalm 25 lectionary reading. Here are verses 4-5 and 8-10.

Psalm 25: 4-5, 8-10 (REB)

Make your paths known to me Lord; teach me your ways. Lead me by your faithfulness and teach me, for you are God my Savior; in you I put my hope all day long.

The Lord is good and upright; therefore he teaches sinners the way they should go. He guides the humble in right conduct, and teaches them his way. All the paths of the Lord are loving and sure to those who keep his covenant and his solemn charge.

This Psalm comes with a textual note. It was a Psalm written for David by a priest who lived centuries after David was dead. The psalm is about what a priest wishes David might have said, could have said, or should have said. To me, the priest's wishes were a whole lot closer to God's revelations of the importance of justice and peace than David's actions. A lot of Hebrew Scripture was written by priests 400 to 800 years before Jesus. One of the most recurrent themes of the priests was prodding kings in the direction of justice and mercy and raising expectations in the general populace that kings should be expected to rule with justice and mercy. This orientation was nurtured by centuries of tribal governance in which tribal elders, village elders, would gather in city gates to discuss the issues of the day and give rulings over disputes. The priestly theme of justice was sometimes corrupted by justice as revenge as part of apocalyptic images, corrupted as the exceptionalism that justifies conquest and oppression, an exceptionalism that justified mistreatment of Native American, African slaves, and Scotch-Irish immigrants, that justified the conquest of Iraq for Dick Cheney's neo-con vision of capturing Iraqi oil for multinational oil companies.

The uncorrupted priestly vision is also strong in Hebrew Scripture and I believe it is a key to understanding Jesus as Savior. The priest's vision was more oligarchy than democracy but it nonetheless founded one of the most valuable and enduring gifts of Hebrew scripture: rule by law in part as protection for the poor against the avarice of kings and others with power. It is one of the historical foundations of democracy in the United States, a country ruled by law rather than narrow tribal culture. Despite lots of tribal bad behavior in the United States, then and now, we have endured as a nation, prospered as a nation, because we have constructed and defended laws that constrain the avarice of the wealthy and provide at least some access to the courts for appeals to justice and mercy.

I grew up thinking of Jesus mostly as a prophet and that still seems right to me. What has changed for me in more recent years is a growing understanding that the sharp divide I had drawn between priest and prophets was unfair.

I grew up with a lot of disdain for many of the clergy I knew. They lacked the courage to challenge racism in the South in the 1950s and 1960s. That colored my perception of Hebrew priests two and a half millenia ago. Jeremiah and others paint striking pictures of sold out priests who sucked up to kings and told them what they wanted to hear. The temple priests of the time of Jesus are depicted largely as enemies who sucked up to Herod and killed Jesus. These personal and biblical images dominated my image of priests. However, A closer reading of Hebrew scripture points to prophets as people who stood up for the the priestly narrative of justice and mercy, people who saw the future as based in the faith of the people rather than the unconstrained might of kings. Read the priest written stories of David and other kings, with the possible exception of Solomon, and you get a constant litany of critique. Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah can be understood as priests with courage.

The destruction of the Temple and the genocide of Jerusalem, horrible events, provided a spiritual chaos which allowed several versions of Judaism to explore. and at least temporarily thrive, in some locations. The Pharisees carried forward the traditions of Hebrew scripture that morphed into modern Judaism. The spiritual asceticism of John the Baptist and his followers seemed appropriate in the wilderness, the hangout of the rebellious Zealots. John didn't preach armed revolt but his anger fed rebellious spirits. Baptism as forgiveness of sins did away with need to appease God with animal sacrifices, a significant financial base of temple Judaism. The Judaism of the Samaritans still has a small remnant of followers to this day. They looked to the Torah but not to the temple and not to the later priestly writings.

They carried forward a tradition of tribal Judaism. Apocalyptic Judaism gathered around desperate hope and later turned Hebrew Scripture into mathematical puzzles. The Christian Way was referenced to Jesus and grew up as a synthesis of Hebrew Scripture and Gentile practice. It was uninterested in the details of Hebrew ritual practices but very interested in the priestly narrative of justice and mercy as guidance for forming Christian communities.

With this in mind let me read the selected lectionary verses from Psalm 25 once again.

Psalm 25: 4-5, 8-10 (REB)

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The Lord is good and upright; therefore he teaches sinners the way they should go. He guides the humble in right conduct, and teaches them his way. All the paths of the Lord are loving and sure to those who keep his covenant and his solemn charge.

Now we are ready for my version of an Advent sermon.

Faithfully follow the loving paths of the enduring covenant God offers everyone, a covenant freshly revealed and courageously embodied in Jesus. Forget about trying to buy Christmas or salvation.

Instead of looking for a literal magical star as a guide in the midst of darkness, try reading one of the Christmas stories without getting hung up on miracles or nostalgia, without getting hung up on metaphysical claims for the specialness of Jesus, and look for what is meaningful and valuable in the story you choose as Matthew's or Luke's effort to tell you about why Jesus mattered so much to them. Our Eyes to See, Ears to Hear, Peace Prayer Mission Group is

working with Matthew's story. If you choose that story we can provide you with the biblical prompts we are working with to help us along.

Instead of understanding Advent with the theme of "we should be waiting" we can turn the theme upside down. We can ask ourselves are we in fact already waiting rather than getting started. Have we started and then stalled out? This makes Advent a time of confronting our hesitations and blockages and claiming the courage to turn corners on our paths to loving engagement along a shared Christian Way, with a shared Christian community. Let's give each other flashlights for Advent presents. Let's help each other find the on button.

And if nobody gives you a flashlight remember that you already have what you need and stumble along into the next step you have been avoiding. Turn a corner and you might discover that the world is bright after all and you just had your eyes closed.

Jesus was a human baby and maybe he was born to an unwed mother. Everything magical in the Christmas stories can remind you that the authors are testifying to how valuable their Christian faith has been for them and their communities.

I'm glad Jesus was born and a lot more glad that he grew up to become the adult he was. We were born too. We too have the gifts of Hebrew Scripture and we also have the Christian Testament. We too can grow up to become courageous adults willing to take the risks of loving each other, willing to take the risks to following our callings to be servants to each other and the wider world. We can walk the Christian Way thankful that Jesus embodied the priestly narrative of guiding our individual and shared lives with justice and mercy.

Jesus wasn't a messiah who brought revenge on the enemies of Judaism in the name of Justice. Jesus opened opportunities for meaningful, thankful, and loving life before death and not the escapism of dreaming the end of the world. Jesus was the Messiah we need, the Savior we need, because he addresses our

deepest spiritual needs, because the risks and worth taking even when we lose by the standards of the world. Give and take a little love for Christmas.