

SERMON

STARTERS

Patricia Farris

December 3, 2006

First Sunday in Advent

Jer. 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10;
1 Thess. 3:9-13, Luke 21:25-36

The first Sunday of Advent starts the clock on a new Christian year. Its deep, dark purple-blue parameters, the color of the night sky just before dawn, are luminescent, full of the promise of new light, new life, new hope, new birth. In contrempts to the frenzied holiday preparations of the world, the church's worship in this season creates breathing space for watching, waiting, and preparing. The preacher's words must be measured and poetic, layered with meaning and metaphor. For the news they signal has the power to heal, the power to engender hope, the power to change lives and transform the world.

This first Sunday's readings hold in exquisite tension the promise of ages and the terror of end-times, two prophetic visions still fighting for the allegiance of the human heart, a vision of terror and a vision of salvation. The apocalyptic imagery of Luke's Gospel graphically names the fears of our time and of our hearts: distress among nations confused by the roaring waters of sea and waves and signs in the heavens. Post-tsunami, post-Katrina, foundering in war, how dare we look for the Lord in the wind and the waves or in the night sky? Many in this generation have passed away. Many have perished. (Consider also the Observance of World AIDS Day, December 1st). Many live in fear and foreboding as the only thing they can see "coming upon the world" seems to bear the violent face of war and poverty, destruction, and disease.

It is to this nightmare that Jeremiah speaks. Yes, the days are coming, but we are to know that they are days of promise and hope. Judah will be saved and restored and Jerusalem will live in safety. It is for us, God's faithful people, say the psalmist and Paul, to keep the covenant and allow ourselves to be led and taught along paths of righteousness and truth. As God works

in us to increase our love for one another and for all, the light increases in intensity. We pray day and night, waiting for the God of our salvation. And in constantly remembering the covenant promise of our God, our fear is transfigured into trust. Our cynicism and despair are redeemed by hope. *Adventus Redemptoris!*

December 10, 2006

Second Sunday in Advent

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6

A news story about governors, power brokers, and various politicians might, to our ears, suggest yet another all-too-real headline out of Washington, Sacramento, Austin, or Baghdad. Luke is so very intentional about making it clear that his story occurs in real time, in real lives, in real struggles over life and death. This is "Reality Gospel," without a doubt. Then, as now, the story comes to people losing hope, people wondering if God might still be out there listening, people wondering what life is about, what it is for, and if things can possibly ever get better.

The prophet Malachi addresses an Israelite people who have fallen from power and prestige. From exile and wandering, they had inhabited the promised land and perched on the pinnacle of power. But the world changed around them, and other people in other places rose to prominence. Why not fall away from God if God was falling away from them?

Are we so different? We look around this world and wonder if God still has anything to say. We list out our slate of leaders and wonder if any of them will offer the leadership and vision we so need. We know the temptation of narrowing our focus way down to the manageability of our own families and personal lives, hoping to make it through before the whole global mess comes tumbling down around us.

How does the Word of God come into a world such as this? Do we not hunger to know that how we live makes a difference

and that what we believe in matters and that the vision God has planted in our hearts of a time of justice and peace for all God's creation is more than beautiful poetry?

God's messengers point the way. John the Baptizer speaks to this very world in its very specific need, his message cutting through our numbness and despair. Malachi reminds of God's covenant, a covenant that God has pledged never to break. God is ready. Our job is to prepare the way.

December 17, 2006

Third Sunday in Advent

Zeph. 3:14-20; Isa. 12:2-6; Phil. 4:4-7;
Luke 3:7-18

The third Sunday of Advent is the season's traditional day of rejoicing. In our worship, we light the pink candle of the Advent wreath, the candle of joy. (Depending upon your choice of scripture for Christmas Eve morning, you may wish to use the readings for the fourth Sunday of Advent on this day in order to fully tell Mary's story and sing her song. We light the pink candle for her as well.)

Read Zephaniah, Isaiah, and Paul to hear the crescendoing notes of joy and of singing. The salvation that comes from the Lord vanquishes fear and removes disaster. What sort of salvation removes all judgment and blame? What kind of warrior is this God, who, yes, gives victory and takes away enemies, but does so through the renewal of love and the exultation of song? Who is this victor who gathers the lame and the outcast, making them renowned and praised through all the earth? What new heaven and new earth are foreseen in the good news of God's coming?

It is the clear intent of the Lord to restore the fortunes of the exiles and to gather them and bring them home. It is simultaneously the ethical imperative of his servants to pursue justice and equity. Two coats become one too many if there

are those with none. No one should have more than enough food if there are any who hunger. Tax collectors and soldiers are cautioned against taking advantage of their power and authority by taking more than is minimally required. And all this comes as great good news to those who have lived marginal lives of fear, oppression, and exploitation.

The whole church would be blessed by an experience of the Hispanic tradition of *Las Posadas* (Service of Shelter for the Holy Family, *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, 266 ff.) Created to introduce Christianity to the New World, this tradition has been adapted by United Methodists for our use. It is a preparation for the birth of the baby Jesus, the Savior. Singing and praying as they move from home to home, the Holy Family seeks hospitality, acceptance, and shelter, until at last they are received with joy. The peace of Christ is given multiple dimensions on this third Sunday of Advent and in all things, God's people rejoice.

December 24, 2006
Fourth Sunday in Advent
 Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:47-55; Luke 1:39-45

As the fourth Sunday of Advent falls on Christmas Eve morning this year, congregations will have several approaches to consider. Given local custom, a service of Lessons and Carols might be used in either the morning or evening service. Seniors and families with very young children, who might prefer not to venture out at night, may enjoy a service of candlelighting in the morning.

If not used on the third Sunday of Advent, the readings for the fourth Sunday of Advent bring a poignant encounter with Mary to the worship of this day. The Lectionary pairs the encounter of Mary and her cousin, Elizabeth, with Mary's song, the Magnificat, so that both the young woman and her song testify to the power of God to turn expectations on end and bring new life out of unexpected places. It

is this young woman, poor, unwed, and pregnant, who says a powerful yes to life. It is she who enables the realization of God's promise to bring the exiles home. It is she who says yes to the Incarnation. And it is she, as the stories say, who traveled great distance with Joseph on a hard and exhausting journey, that they might be listed on the official roll of the Roman state. It is she who gave birth to her son in the strange "home" of a cattle shed. It is she who will receive the Magi bringing their exotic and portentous gifts. It is she who will soon flee Herod's wrath, with Joseph and her newborn son, in order to keep him alive.

The worship of Christmas Eve morning invites us each to consider, with Mary, our willingness and intention to say yes to life, to the new life being born around and within.

(Some congregations might also want to explore the resources for Kwanzaa found at the GBOD/Worship website for Sunday or daily observances during the week between Christmas and New Year's.)

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December 31, 2006
Christmas/New Year's Eve
Day/Epiphany

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13; Rev. 21:1-6a;
Matt. 2:1-12

Another year ends and a new year begins with the promise of God's renewing spirit permeating all things. Worship planners and preachers are faced with a bounteous array of possibilities in considering themes and scripture for this day, as Christmas unfolds into Epiphany. With the first Sunday of Christmas falling on New Year's Eve day this year, congregations might use readings from both New Year's Eve Day and Epiphany.

If crèches and manger scenes are still up in homes and at church, congregations could welcome the arrival of the Magi at the manger and their announcement of the universal scope of God's love and salvation in Christ Jesus. Scripture readings could combine Matthew 2:1-12, the coming of the Magi, with Ecclesiastes and Revelation and their focus on time and renewal. The ramifications of the cosmic and universal newness of this birth become increasingly manifest.

Congregations might base their worship on Wesley's Covenant Renewal Service (*The United Methodist Book of Worship*, 288 ff.) John Wesley created the Watch Night service to be observed on New Year's Eve as a service of Covenant Renewal at the beginning of the year. In Wesley's understanding, we are not alone, but are held in the covenant community in the Body of Christ by God, whom Wesley called "our Covenant Friend."

This is powerful and beautiful good news to affirm with one another at the year's inauguration. In the great expanse of time, we are not alone, for the God who joins in covenant with us is the God of past, present, and future. And in the great expanse of space we are not alone, for God places us in covenant community with fellow believers who share our joys and sorrows and help us to believe where we do not yet see.

God comes to be at home with us, bringing a sense of past and future into our minds that affirms hope, creates community, and imbues us with power and purpose.

January 7, 2007
The Baptism of the
Lord/First Sunday after
Epiphany

Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

The readings for this Sunday bring us back 'round to John the Baptizer, but with a twist, as the emphasis shifts to Jesus and to baptism—both his and ours. The voice of God speaks the eternal word of recognition, acceptance, and expectation. "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you," the Lord said. "I have called you by name, you are mine." "You are my child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." The people who walk in darkness of whatever kind are still seeking the light and love, which this assurance brings.

There is a sense of possibility at the beginning of a new year, akin to the expectation that filled the people around John. What does it mean to walk Jesus' path, to carry his sign, to bear his name? The early church called baptism by the Greek name, *photismos*, which meant enlightening or illumination. When we put Christ in our baptism, we take our part in the light of his glory and truth and set out to share that light with others.

The service of Baptismal Renewal offers an opportunity to remember our baptism and ground ourselves in faith as the year begins. This is also a pregnant moment in which to invite others into the journey of baptism and church membership.

We cannot know how we will be called upon to let our light shine, or what darkness it may illumine for another, what dark places of the human heart or of this world it might open, what joy it will bring, what comfort or hope. We can only be ready and ever willing to share with others the light we have received. The once immanent light of Advent now shines forth through us in the fullness of its brilliant potentiality. □



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