

ADVENT: THE CHRISTIAN HOPE

The Christian faith is history. Living the Christian faith is living history. Christianity is about God telling his story about his relationship with his creation and especially his chosen people in time and space. With the internalization of faith in the Christian culture, succumbing to the pressures of an unbiblical worldview, Christians find it odd to speak about salvation in terms of historical events. Salvation, everyone knows, is about my personal relationship with God and that sense of peace that I have. It is a private experience that somehow rises above history and looks to escape from history with all of its horrible fleshly bindings.

All of these concepts concerning salvation and history would have seemed odd to our forefathers in the faith that lived in Bible times (that includes the New Covenant [NC] but is not exclusive to the NC). For centuries our fathers in the faith worshiped God telling the story of redemption. When fruit was brought to the Lord after the people of God had settled in the promised land, they were to recount Israel's history. As Passover was celebrated through the centuries the custom arose which was consonant with the offering of the fruit. On the night of the Passover the youngest son would ask, "Why is this night distinguished from all other nights?" After questioning all the distinctions of the night, the child received a response from his father.

But he did not respond by saying "Point 1: The Doctrine of God." To be sure, there are many truths about God that are revealed and foundational to the story, but it was the story that was told. This is the story Moses told the people to recount in bringing an offering to the Lord:

And you shall make response before Yahweh your God, "A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. Then we cried to Yahweh, the God of our fathers, and Yahweh heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. And Yahweh brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O Yahweh, have given me." (Deut 26.5-10)

This was the recounting of the great deeds that God had done and what that meant in the present and what it looked forward to in the future. That story is now shaped around and focused on that which happened in Jesus. Our story has a past, lives in the present and looks toward the conclusion. We live in the present grasping the past in one hand and the future in the other. The season of Advent brings the history of hope in Jesus into focus for the church and aids us in living out the history of hope.

In order to understand the meaning of Advent, we need to make sure that we grasp the nature of the Christian hope. I am afraid that many Christians, having been immersed in a certain Christian theological climate for some time, have this problem with understanding the Christian hope. So, in the setting of learning about Advent, let's refresh our understanding about the certain hope that God promises his people.

ADVENT AS THE CHRISTIAN HOPE

The word "advent" is not confined to so-called "religious" usage. Advent simply means "coming." This is not really the best way to describe the Biblical picture of Jesus' birth or his

future presence on the earth. New Testament (NT) authors are more fond of words such as “manifestation,” “revelation” or, most prominent in Paul, “presence” (the meaning of the Greek word *parousia*, more than likely with overtones of “royal presence”). There is no harm in using the term “advent” or “coming” as long as we do not carry the baggage that sometimes comes with those words. For example, we cannot believe that God is some distant, disassociated being sitting in a distant land that will one day show up on earth. This is what is normally called *deism*. We believe in a God who is always and intimately associated with his creation yet separate from it. When the Bible speaks about God coming, it speaks more in terms of *apocalypse*, the unveiling, the revelation of Jesus Christ (see for example, Rev 1.1, the “apocalypse of Jesus Christ”). This is the manifestation of what has been there all along. The difference is now we can see it.

Nevertheless, Advent is the name of the Christian season, and Jesus’ “advent,” in the traditional use of the term, is the essence of the Christian hope.

What is the Christian hope?

If you were to ask the average evangelical on the street, “What is the Christian hope?” more often than not—I would say the vast majority of the time—you would receive the answer, “Going to heaven when I die.” It is no wonder this is the common answer in the church. This is what is preached from our pulpits. It is the popular theology of the day, and it is one of the two diagnostic questions developed by our Presbyterian brother for Evangelism Explosion: “Do you know for certain that if you were to die today you would go to heaven?” Going to heaven when you die becomes by default the definition of the Christian hope.

I fear that our lack of understanding of God’s relationship to creation, the story of the Bible and the implications of the resurrection—in short, a deficient biblical worldview—has allowed us to slip into a theology with which Plato would have been quite happy to affirm but Paul would have denounced with all of his might. In the modern, popular Christian worldview the resurrection of Jesus means I can go to heaven when I die. But questions arise about all this talk about the resurrection of our bodies when Jesus comes again. Why is all this happening? Why is this necessary if we are already in heavenly disembodied bliss?

To be sure, there is continuing life after death. For the faithful there is a life in the presence of Christ unlike we know in the present. When we die we are present with the Lord in heaven. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor 5.8). This condition is far better than our present condition in many respects. Paul said that for him it would be far better to depart and be with Christ (Phil 1.23). Living in this disembodied state, though it is a time of rest, is not the full-orb Christian hope. In fact, Paul says that this condition between death and the resurrection is a time of being “unclothed” or “naked” (2 Cor 5.2-4), a time which, he says, is a necessary step between our deaths and then death being swallowed up in life. Paul, we learn from his writings, was not striving to attain going to heaven when he died. We find that Paul was desiring to know Christ in the power of his resurrection, the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable to his death so that by any means he might attain the resurrection of the dead (Phil 3.10-11). “Going to heaven when you die” therefore is not the final hope of the Christian faith. That is only a stop-over to the final hope.

So what is the Christian hope? The Christian hope is the unveiling (or coming) of Christ at the consummation of our present history. This is not just a bland “Christ shows up.” The hope that is wrapped up in the coming of Christ involves many things. The writer of Hebrews says it like this: “... so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for

him he will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation” (Heb 9.28). Christ’s second appearing will be for our salvation. That which involved in that salvation is the Christian hope. Several things are involved in that salvation that is realized at Christ’s second appearing.

1. The reign of Christ will be fully manifested on the earth.

All of Christ’s enemies will be put under his feet. We will see the righteousness ruling in the earth. The world we be put into proper relationship with God. The house of God which man was called to build will be completed; Christ having finished the work as the true man.

2. The vindication of God’s people.

God’s people will be shown to be in the right, and we will judge the nations with Christ. God will declare openly to the world that we are his people and the rightful heirs of the world.

3. Death will be defeated.

It is a sad view of the Christian hope which allows death to defeat God’s people at any point. But that is exactly the problem with modern conceptions of the Christian hope. We are content to leave this old body in the grave. But the Christian hope is that our final hope is that death is swallowed up in victory or in life, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 and 2 Corinthians 5.

4. Creation will be renewed.

The world is not something that God is simply going to throw in the trash heap. God is about the business of renewing the entire Creation in and through Christ. This is what Paul speaks about in Romans 8. This is that for which Paul says that the creation itself groans. God’s people in the present are to be groaning with and in behalf of creation in waiting for our redemption, the deliverance of our bodies (cf. Rom 8:19ff.).

This Christian hope is not understood nor proclaimed as much as it should be because we don’t seem to grasp the story of the Scriptures which begins with the Creator God who, in response to sin, made promises to redeem the entire world. Our anemic individualistic view of salvation has made the Christian hope sound, if people were to be honest, not as good as the popular view of the Christian hope. Normally, when thinking about going to heaven when I die, most of what I think of as being heaven is more like the great, big candy shop in the sky in which I am going to be a toddler who loves candy. Heaven, and thus the Christian hope for many Christians, sad to say, is the final place of self-indulgence. The Christian hope is a mansion over the hilltop lavished with French provincial furniture and sitting around playing a harp and eating bon-bons. This may be your dream. But it is not our hope. Our hope—which is not an attitude but the promise of God—is the righteous rule of Christ being manifest in the earth, the vindication of God’s people, death being swallowed up in life and the creation being renewed with all that goes with these things. This is the inheritance promised to our father Abraham. This is our hope.

But this brings up another question to which we must turn our attention and which will inform our celebration of the season of Advent:

What does Christian hope have to do with present living?

The first thing we need to understand here is that *the future hope shapes present living*. As the writer of Hebrews emphasizes throughout his epistle, your final goal—the inheritance promised by God—and what you believe about that will determine how you live in the present. The Christian hope shapes our present practice. When Paul says that he desires to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable to his death so that by any means he may attain the resurrection of the dead, the future resurrection is his motivation for living the life he is living in the present.

While this may sound “far out” to some people, really it is something that we live every day. That which we want for the future—whether near or distant—shapes what we do in the present. For instance, if a young man wants to be a doctor in the future, that will determine many things in his pre-doctor days. It means that he will need to be very familiar with the sciences. It also means that he will have to do some things sometimes that he does not particularly enjoy. But the goal of becoming a doctor determines his actions in the present. Now, if a young man aspires to be a computer technician, a plumber, a construction worker, or a salesman in the future, his present actions will take a different course than the young man who wants to be a doctor. The point is, the future shapes the present. So it is with the Christian hope.

The second truth we need to understand here is that *the future hope informs present living*. Our Christian hope tells us what things will be like. That vision of the future informs us as to what we are to be doing right now. Our lives are to be lived in such a way so that we begin to shape the present to look like the future. In other words, we are not to be sitting on our hands waiting for the great cataclysmic day to arrive when all things are put to rights. We are to be working in the present to shape the future. This does not mean that we bring in the kingdom through human efforts. But it does mean that what we do here and now is moving toward and is consistent with what Christ is doing and will do in the future.

Third, we need to understand that *the future hope is continuous with the present*. What is done here and now has ramifications for life *after* the resurrection. It is not as if this all of this life will just be a bad memory with little or nothing to do with the life in the resurrection. There is a continuity between this life and the next. Paul’s climax to his discussion in 1 Corinthians 15 concerning the resurrection is probably not what many of us would expect. Instead of saying, “Isn’t all of this glorious stuff! Now worship God with greater vigor and thanksgiving” or saying, “Now wait for the resurrection,” Paul says, “Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Cor 15.58). Paul says that what you do right now matters for coming future life in the resurrection. Your labor—whatever that may be to the glory of God and empowered by the Spirit—is not in vain in the Lord. The basis for Paul’s statement is the resurrection of Jesus himself. In the resurrection we see a continuity (as well as a discontinuity) between old creation and new creation. What is done in this present life will somehow be carried over into the future life, having been transformed. That which cannot be transformed will be burned up (cf. 1 Cor 3). But what you do now as God’s people will be a part of the new creation. Certainly things will be radically different (and that must not be down-played), but the difference will not be start-all- over new. Like Jesus resurrection, our resurrection will be our lives transformed.

The relationship of future hope and present living then is one of intimate connection that must be taken seriously by the Christian. Your work—whether a doctor or a computer tech, whether a pastor or a mother, whether a missionary or an artist—your work will be carried over in a transformed way into the coming age. Thus, the conclusion of the story, should shape the way we write the chapters of our lives.

ADVENT AS THE CHRISTIAN SEASON

This Christian hope with all of its various facets are woven into the historical celebration of the Advent season. Interestingly, Advent was developed as the last aspect of the Christian calendar. It was not really implemented in the Christian calendar until the sixth century. Even then there was controversy over whether or not it should be a part of the Christian calendar and, if was a part of the Christian calendar, how it should be celebrated. It seems to have developed as another Lenten-type observance that preceded the celebration of baptism on January 6, the baptism of Jesus or Epiphany. Like Easter this might have been another time in the Liturgical Year in which catechumens were baptized. The early historical evidence points to the development of Advent as being in Spain and/or Gaul.

Advent consists of four Sundays that precede Christmas. Woven within these Lord's Days is a focus on the glorious tension in which we live between the Advents; the hope that has been realized and the hope yet to come. Again, as with all other aspects of the Liturgical Year, Easter informs us in the proper celebration of the season. The resurrection gives us understanding of the first advent and the resurrection gives us the foundation for the second advent. We are told with power in the resurrection of Jesus that the long-expected hope of the people of God is found in the Person of Jesus who was born in Bethlehem. Jesus is the One promised by God through the prophets. God revealed this to some even before the resurrection.

Take, for instance, Simeon, a faithful man who eagerly awaited the redemption of Israel. The Holy Spirit revealed to him that he would not see death until he saw the One through whom God would reveal his righteousness, his covenant faithfulness, and redeem his people. Simeon saw Jesus when he was presented in the Temple. Here is how the story is told.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel." (Luke 2.25-32)

The advent of the Yahweh's Christ or Messiah was the long-for hope of Israel, God's people. It is this hope that is the focus of the Advent Season in the Christian calendar.

What does Advent Season have to do with Christian hope?

The season of Advent reminds us that *we live between the advents*. Advent, as it relates to the Christian calendar, is purposely ambiguous. Though its calendrical relationship is to Christmas and anticipates the birth of Jesus, Advent readings as well as practice through the years has focused on the second as well as the first coming of Jesus.

As we think about it biblically, we can understand better why this is the case. There are similarities and differences between the first and second advents, and, therefore, there are similarities and differences in the way the people of God live and hope in relationship to these

advents. Consider the similarities.

1. *There is an absence.*

While we know that Jesus is with us at all times in and through the Person of the Spirit, there is also the reality that he is not here. As he himself proclaims to his disciples, he must go away. In Acts 1 Jesus was taken out of their sight into the clouds. And so, just as our fathers in the old creation waited for the presence of Christ and the redemption that was to come through him, so we wait for our final redemption when Christ comes again.

2. *There is a promise.*

Our fathers in the old creation had the promise of God that he would redeem his people. All of God's faithful people held on to that promise (cf. Heb 11). We are also left with the promise that Jesus will come again. And that promise will be fulfilled.

3. *There are activities that should characterize our waiting.*

Simeon and Anna were two of God's faithful people looking for the redemption of Israel. While waiting they were engaged in activities shaped by the promise of God for the future. And as I explained above, we are to be shaped by the future hope of the second coming of Christ.

While there are similarities between the first advent and the second, there are also some major differences. The first dissimilarity is the most glaring.

1. *Jesus had not yet come the first time.*

The old creation saints were waiting for the first coming of Christ. We are waiting for the second with our hope firmly grounded in what has already taken place in the first. Jesus has come and embodied the hope of God's people and given us better promises. Jesus resurrection from the dead during his ministry on earth provides a very different perspective both on the past and the future.

2. *Before the first coming the world almost in complete darkness, but now we live in the light of the new day that has dawned.*

The age to come has broken in on this present age in the resurrection of Jesus. We now live essentially with one foot in the old world and one foot in the new.

So, Advent is the celebration that is torn between two comings. There is a rejoicing in what God has already done in Christ and a groaning for God to complete the work.

The season of Advent also *reminds us of our calling to live in light of the Christian hope.* We are always to be living in light of the hope that we have. But for the purposes of our discipleship, the Church has wisely drawn a focus on this time of the year to emphasize this. Interestingly the Lectionary texts for Advent emphasize Christian conduct.

For example, in Year A (the Lectionary is on a three-year cycle), the epistle reading is Romans 13:11-14 which reads: “

Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For

salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Because the day has dawned and we live in the first light of the day of salvation that is dawning, live right. Don't participate in the works of darkness.

Advent readings joyfully celebrate the arrival of Christ and also emphasize preparation for the conclusion of the story. Living in light of Advent also means being the light of the world. This is one reason that candles and such have been part of Christian worship. The traditional Advent wreath symbolizes the growing light—the dawning of the new day—by lighting an additional candle every Sunday until the Christ candle is lit for Christmas. The light has come into the world. In Christ we are called to be the light of the world. Celebrating Advent is a call to follow Christ in his vocation in being that light.

We don't know exactly what chapter we are on in God's story in relation to the conclusion to this chapter of God's story. But we do know that our story has a beginning, and we have been promised a conclusion. Therefore, we live in expectant hope. May our celebration of Advent be a living out of our Christian hope.