

John 1:6–8, 19–28

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

Taught for the Third Sunday of Advent, Year B (Revised Common Lectionary) · 6 December 2011

These texts for Advent 3 represent something of a joyous interruption in all the pre-Christmas helter-skelter and all the diversions we deal with. In that sense they continue the theme of Advent, which is a renewal of the repentance to which we are called daily. Repentance is generally misunderstood and treated morally, as though it were an occasional process you go through when you blow it: what you need the Saturday night after the night before, something to get you back on the road to sanctification so that you can continue to improve.

Here is a different picture of Advent, and a different picture of repentance. Here repentance is a movement out of ourselves into the joy of what is to come. These texts are just brimming. They're more fun. They have one foot in heaven and one foot on earth, and they're shouting with the light. Even John the Baptist has a kind of crooked grin on his mug. For once the pointed finger and the accusing look have been modified. He has a pointed finger all right, and he is pointing beyond himself all right, but this time he is not pointing at us and saying, "You jerks, clean up your act."

Instead he says, "Among you stands one whom you do not know." And of course that one among us, whom we now know, is Christ Jesus our Lord, who is standing right here with us in the midst of all the contradiction, all the disaster, all the contention, all the malarkey, and especially all the diversion.

Some years ago I read something I can't identify now, which I suppose is Alzheimer's or an early stage of it, that spoke of the sin of diversion. Mind you, I don't think reality is all it's cracked up to be, and I'm pretty well convinced there is a little too much reality to face now, with television and radio and the internet, as we get swamped. But diversion is the process in which we withdraw from ourselves into things that titillate and delight, and deliberately divert us from what is really central. So repentance in these texts takes the form of a joyous interruption, which calls us out of our diversions, out of our self-pursuit, out of our desperate run from reality and our death-bound trip into stupidity.

It calls us out of all this into the confidence of joy and faith, the confidence bestowed on us by Christ Jesus. There is one standing there whom you do not know, because he is the one for others, the man for others, the one whose life is defined by us rather than by his own grab for glory.

Isaiah: The Year of the Lord's Favor

So we'll play with these texts again, as usual, starting with the supporting texts, beginning with this glorious word from the prophet Isaiah, the prophet of Advent, and really the prophet of the lectionary. I think he shows up twenty-nine times out of fifty-two in the Old Testament readings. And here, as usual, he's swinging from the heels. This is just gorgeous; he is preaching his heart out. He begins, "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me." Like Mary, whose Magnificat is practically an ideal sermon, Isaiah doesn't rejoice in himself but in the Spirit that has been placed upon him.

And he immediately identifies the Spirit's purpose: "He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed." These are the addressees, the people in the pew: the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captives, the prisoners, the people of Judah who have lived in captivity and who now, in the ecstasy of release, are being brought home. That is what he is sent for: "to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God." The two go side by side. Unfortunately, in our cultural boundedness, we make an enthusiastic move as children of the fanatics, a term Steve Paulson likes to use, and believe we can have the Lord's favor without the Lord's vengeance. But the two come in one package. He is our adversary as well as our redeemer.

That becomes even clearer, or perhaps a little more murky, as we go on through this reading, because as Isaiah proclaims the year of the Lord's favor, he brings with him a profound turnabout. He is preaching to those who mourn in Zion, and he has come to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning. He promises that they will build up the ancient ruins, raise up the former devastations, and repair the ruined cities. That is, he promises the restoration of all things.

But even in this promise of restoration the pronouns start to slip. This is really interesting. He speaks to them, but he switches back and forth. One thing happening here is that Isaiah sees the hope of Israel as the hope of the earth. The people of Judah and the people of Israel, the people of the two divided nations, each tended to see themselves as the end point of the Word.

Isaiah pokes and prods and drives until he can set forth a vision for the whole earth. Now Israel's hope, the hope of God's chosen people in the widest sense of the term, has become the hope of the earth.

"Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed. I will greatly rejoice in the Lord." Then come the bridegroom and the bride, and the earth bringing forth its shoots. But as the pronouns work, it is Israel, then it is the nations, and sometimes the nations appear to be turning against, as God is turning against. There you go: he is our adversary as well as our redeemer. He comes in judgment, and the judgment is the deliverer's. He frees us from our self-absorption, from our diversions, from our desperate attempts to control what is coming at us by looking down into what we can control and manipulate, divide and keep for ourselves.

Psalm 126: Like Those Who Dream

Julie has given us the text for Psalm 126, though it's labelled Psalm 85. There's no problem with that, so long as we've got the right song; the text is right anyway. This is so much fun, because here the rejoicing, the delight, the ecstasy already present in Isaiah breaks out.

Psalm 126 is a psalm of deliverance, and so it speaks of the restoration as having already happened: "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion." Here is the leg over the wall; here is one foot in heaven. "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream." This was just fabulous.

I've been telling everybody all week about the magnificent dream I had last Wednesday night. We got home to Minnesota on Tuesday night, both of us shot from a long trip, and on Wednesday night I fell into a deep sleep. About three o'clock in the morning I woke up wide awake, because in my dream I had seen a man I served in my congregation in Spokane, whom I dearly loved. It was fabulous. It was the brightest sunshine, and he was right there. I could practically count the whiskers on his cheek. We were standing with our arms around one another. I was down in a ditch and he was above me, and I became aware that he was in heaven and I was not, which is hardly a brilliant insight. We stood with our arms around one another, and all of a sudden he had to go, and I lost him. That's when I woke up. I haven't seen him in thirty or thirty-five years, but there he was. This is one leg in heaven, if only in our dreams.

“When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, ‘The Lord has done great things for them.’” This is repentance: being torn away from self-absorption, being torn away from the diversions that protect us from the realities we don’t care for, and being swept up in the ecstasy. “The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.”

But now reality returns: “Restore our fortunes, O Lord.” The past deliverance is the model for present hope. Restore our fortunes, O Lord; do it again, and again, and again. “May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.” What a delight. This is the picture of bringing in the crop.

One of the most remarkable things I saw when I was teaching in Tanzania happened in town. I was the only white man, the only missionary, who rode the bus, and late one afternoon I was downtown waiting for the bus back out to Makumira, walking over to it with my son Jacob, who was in sixth grade at the time. As we walked along, the lepers had come with the results of their begging for the day and were joining together to make supper under the bridge. It was contrary to everything you would expect, but there was ecstasy among those people. Missing legs and missing arms, bodies falling apart, and they were rejoicing in what they had for the day. They were bringing in the sheaves. That is the blessing. You don’t have to have a lot to get a sense of what it is to be carried away.

1 Thessalonians 5: The Party Is On

If you think that’s fun, go on into 1 Thessalonians 5. The apostle Paul is ecstatic; he’s overflowing. These are the kind of texts Forde used to just love. The free-willers come and say, “Look, it says you should rejoice. Now get with it.” Or, “Pray without ceasing. Apply yourself.” But of course that’s just stupid. You rejoice always because you have no alternative. You pray without ceasing because the good Lord is pulling the words right out of your mouth. You give thanks in all circumstances because the one whom you do not know is standing among you. There he is. “This is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

“Do not quench the Spirit.” Don’t be some dumb turkey. You remember how Forde used to inveigh against people who used grape juice at the sacrament; he had all kinds of nasty comparisons for that. This is a banquet, an eschatological banquet. Don’t quench the Spirit. Join the party. The festivities have begun; just let it all go. “Do not despise the words of

prophets,” but keep your feet on the ground: “test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.” This is what it is to live in the assurance of faith, in the confidence of the gospel, in the joy of what Christ has done to you.

And then a beautiful blessing. I just love this: “May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely.” Compare that with some dumb preacher standing up and making sanctification a project. It’ll make you sick. “May the God of peace himself.” Do you think he is going to leave my sanctification to me? That would be absolutely foolish. I’d blow that like I blow everything else. “May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Now there’s one you can trust: “The one who calls you is faithful.” And what does it say? “And he will do this.” He will do this. All right, now we’ve got a fighting chance, because he will do this. And because he will do this, sanctification takes the form of the delightful surprise of being caught up in him in the middle of December, grinning with joy over the promise of what’s to come.

There we go. This is the joyous interruption, breaking out right in these texts. By the time the psalmist and 1 Thessalonians get done with you, the party’s on: Isaiah, as host, standing and welcoming you into the party; the psalm putting its arm around you and telling you to dance a little; and then Paul getting loose in 1 Thessalonians with his fiddle, setting everybody’s foot tapping and everybody dancing. It’s just fabulous.

John: A Light and a Voice

But we’re not done yet. Now we have this magnificent text from John, and I suppose the first thing you’ll think when you read it through is what I thought when I looked at it: it’s an awful lot like what we had last week. But as usual with John’s Gospel, even when he is working with much the same material, there is a little something extra, and this is really fun.

Who is John the Baptist? He is the prophet of Advent, of course. He is the voice crying in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord.” He is, as Mark says, the beginning of the gospel of God. Now what makes him the beginning of the gospel of God? I suppose we could say historically that his coming is an advent in and of itself. And we know from the early Christian community that people had a hard time telling the difference. These two cousins, as we presume, look so much alike, and their stories are very much alike, and nowhere is that more apparent than in this text.

“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.” Who is John the Baptist? As we’ll hear in just a verse, he is a voice. But here John the evangelist has another image: he is a light.

I’ve thought a lot about this, driving across the country again. We get three days in the car, and we sit there together writing Christmas cards, which is a lot of fun. When you drive the prairies at night and see a light, there is something very friendly about it. Years ago I served down in southwest Oregon, and I have been out on the ocean with my fishermen; I still go out with them. When you’re out on the ocean in the dark and you see a light, you know it’s friendly. There’s a light turning, a light that just winks, and then all of a sudden you see it bright.

So here is a light, and more than that, a voice: the voice of someone who cares for you, the voice of one bringing good news. It’s like hearing your mother’s voice, or the voice of your spouse, or the voice of one of your kids. Today I have been listening to the voice of my grandson, and that voice by itself bears hope. So we have John, who is a light and a voice, and that is all he will be. This is what’s fabulous here.

Who Are You?

Just listen to the conversation. “This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’” You know who these priests and Levites are. They’re the bishops, the religious authorities who are worried sick that something is going to go wrong, that somebody is going to interfere with their power, and who are sending out their protection. So here they come with the lawyers, of course, and with their investigators. Who is this? Who is this guy anyway? And they say flat out, “Who are you?” Interesting question. Where do you come from? They want his credentials, so they know whether he’s safe or whether he’s somebody who ought to be run out.

“He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, ‘I am not the Messiah.’” Who are you? I am not the Messiah. Lots of fun. “And they asked him, ‘What then? Are you Elijah?’” You see the proportions John the Baptist has assumed in the community. He’s a voice crying in the wilderness; he’s a light. But with his preaching he has created such an uproar, such consternation, that they have to start at the top. “I’m not the Messiah.” You could legitimately assume he might be, because of what he has been doing out there in the wilderness. And

when he says he's not that, they say, "Well, are you Elijah?" "No, not him either." "Are you the prophet?", the prophet of the last days? "No," he answered, "I'm not that either."

"Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?'" They're frustrated. They are trying to figure out what in the world is going on. What do you have to say for yourself? Here is the normal human assumption: that he is going to define himself, fill out his space with significance, identify himself in a way they can get hold of. And once they get hold of him they can categorize him, put him in a place of safety or a place of threat, get his Social Security number and ascertain his identity beyond question, and, once they've got him in place, keep him in place so he's no threat to anybody. You know the whole treatment: some bishop out here asking, "Who called you? Are you safe? You're not going to ask too many questions, are you? You'll stay in your place and not bother me?"

And so John the Baptist finally says, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." Of course, no surprise, "they had been sent from the Pharisees." We could have anticipated that: here is the lay religious movement looking after the moral health of Israel, and they have to make sure.

And what is he? He is a voice. He is a proclaimer, one who has been sent with a word, sent to declare, sent from God. He is the voice whose sole and exclusive function is to point beyond himself. Here is how these two cousins are alike. This is what makes John the Baptist the beginning of the gospel of God: unlike Eve, unlike Adam, unlike the whole human community, he refuses to establish his own identity. John the Baptist makes no claim for himself other than to identify his voice. He is one who speaks, and he speaks in the name of the Lord. Like his cousin, he does not count any equality with God he might claim as something to be grasped. He is not advancing himself. He is simply a voice, one who is heard. As a voice, he has an announcement.

Well, of course this upsets the Pharisees, and they get all confused. He has refused to fill in the blanks. He won't take the Minnesota Multiphasic. There's no self-advancement here, none of the normal braggadocio and self-assertion. No list of hobbies, no list of travels, no list of credentials, nothing. "I am a voice," that's all.

"Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" How in the world are we going to fit you into a manageable category? How are we going to

make sure you're controllable and no threat? What's the deal?

Among You Stands One Whom You Do Not Know

"John answered them." Listen to the voice now. Here it comes. "I baptize with water." All right, that's my job. "Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." There's his sermon. There's the voice. There's John's message: among you stands one whom you do not know. You thought you had me figured out, you jerks. He didn't quite say that. But among you stands one whom you do not know.

And we still can't figure him out. Marcus Borg has made an industry of running around the country making sure that Jesus fits the mores of the upper middle class and is no threat. And the right wing, the evangelicals, have turned him into the blond, blue-eyed Jesus who is no problem for anybody. But Jesus still gets out of the control of the historical critics, and out of the control of the evangelicals. He breaks loose in the Word, and when he breaks loose in the Word, he makes faith. He forgives sin. He delivers from death and the devil. He brings in the new future. There he is, standing right there in your word, on your lips, right there in your congregation, delivering the goods, handing himself over.

"I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." Well, of course not. Who would even dare? This is the one Dietrich Bonhoeffer used to call the man for others: the only one who ever kept the First Commandment, the only one capable of breaking into our death-bound diversions, our flight from reality, our desperate efforts to have ourselves, breaking in and then handing himself over so that we could become what Adam was meant to be, creatures of the earth, rejoicing in him always, praying constantly, spilling over with grace. My goodness, you could have Christmas on these texts. They are just full of the good Word, spilling over with it. There is enough to keep you going all Sunday and probably into Monday too.

It reminds me of preaching in Tanzania. They always got ticked off at me if I didn't preach for at least an hour. Once I went for an hour and fifteen minutes, and when I sat down they said, "Are you taking a break?" Well, you could use that much on these texts, because the whole goal is to say just what John says in this text: among you stands one whom you do not know.

Isaiah, the psalm, and the apostle Paul give you a leg over the windowsill into heaven itself. In this text Christ Jesus has a leg over the windowsill, and he is coming out. He is coming out

after you, because Advent is turning; it is coming to an end. The one whom we await is breaking in.

You remember that great sermon Don Juel preached years ago? He said, “Lots of people think that when the temple curtain was torn in two, it signified that we could get in there. That’s not it at all. What it indicates is that Christ Jesus has broken out. He has broken through that curtain like it was spandex, and he is breaking in on you, so that, breaking in on you, he can bestow his gifts and make you what you were meant to be.” I was sitting next to a student in chapel when Juel preached that, and the student gasped in terror. And shouldn’t we all? It’s more than we can handle: our adversarial redeemer bearing down on us while we sit fiddling with our stupidities, trying to protect our minor-league sovereignties. Well, it’s great: he’s here again.

Have you got questions? I suppose I’ve fried your circuits. I hope so.

Questions and Answers

A question whether anything is to be made of John’s not understanding himself to be who Jesus saw him as, that is, Elijah.

I’d be a little careful about drawing that distinction too hard. The suggestion is certainly made in the Gospels that Jesus sees him as Elijah. But John’s identity unfolds, and we are at a late stage of the discussion in John’s Gospel. This has been a real controversy. There were followers of John who remained convinced that he was the Messiah; in fact there is still a community of disciples of John the Baptist making that claim. So his identity was a matter of dispute all the way through the writing of the New Testament. I’m a little hesitant to say for sure that Jesus understood John to be Elijah while John understood himself differently. We have these texts always in the mouth of another.

Let me give you a quick example. Carolyn and I have two homes; we are at home in Oregon and at home here. When we drive back from Oregon it takes two and a half days, and we talk the whole time about what it’s going to be like to see our son and our dear grandson and granddaughter. When we get there, reality has a way of reshaping our expectations. I see this as a little more ambiguous than your question suggests: the reality fills itself in.

A question about John’s distinguishing his baptism from Jesus’ baptism with the Holy Spirit.

John distinguishes his baptism from Jesus' on this basis: that Jesus' baptism is a baptism with the Holy Spirit. In Luke-Acts there is clearly an ecstatic community that is part of Luke's audience, and that group understands the baptism of the Holy Spirit in somewhat different terms: more as an ecstatic outbreak, miracles of healing, miracles of deliverance, and so on. That community is probably among the original communities of the New Testament, and you can see it in the background in Mark and Matthew as well. It is over against that community that Paul and Mark particularly, but also Matthew and to a lesser extent Luke, are proclaiming the resurrection in terms of the cross. Rather than supernatural deliverances, what happens is that you are delivered under the sign of the cross; believers bear the mark. "We have this treasure," the treasure of the resurrection, "in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us."

I've never been able to make peace with that community in Luke; it's hard to know what to make of them. But this certainly is true: there is a distinction between their baptism by the Holy Spirit and the baptism by the Holy Spirit that John the Baptist proclaims. In John the Baptist's proclamation, it is the difference between external and internal: between a baptism that is merely an external act and a baptism that takes hold of the heart. That is clearly what's happening in John's Gospel. John the Baptist is going for the heart with his preaching. "Among you stands one whom you do not know." What fun. Does it get better than that? In the end you will know him better, and he already knows you.

A question about why John, in prison, sent to ask whether Jesus was the one who is to come.

Oh, I love that, don't you? According to the Gospel of Mark, John understands himself as the beginning of the gospel of God. And here he is in prison. Nice start: it was a good beginning, but it all went to hell. Well, not quite. Last year Carolyn and I went to see Richard Strauss's opera *Salome*, where she does a lewd dance with John the Baptist's head. I could hardly stand it. But that's not a bad historical portrait of what happened. He ends up at the mercy of a dancing girl who has moved old Herod to lust and beyond, panting and sweating, saying, "Ask me for whatever you want, little girl, and I will give it to you." It's just awful.

So John the Baptist, the beginning of the gospel of God, knows he's a dead man, in the most sordid circumstances. No wonder he asks. He has to ask, because this is not what he was expecting. But this is the gospel: it enters under such a sign.

A comment on baptizing in the name.

You've got it exactly. The name is not a symbol or a sign; it is the reality. God is in his name. So we baptize not in the name of a job description, not in the name of some interchangeable part. I've heard all kinds of prayers like that. A friend and I were at a conference down in North Carolina where we heard a prayer in which the one praying was in effect throwing words up in the hope that some unnamed force would catch them. But Christ Jesus has revealed his name: he is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And when we baptize in his name, "where two or three are gathered in my name," there I am at work, doing it. If you've only got yourself and one other person, that will do it too. He is right there.

A comment that the questioning of John is a direct parallel to what happens to Jesus.

Exactly right. It's a direct parallel, but it's also a direct parallel to you. This is what happens when the gospel enters: one whom you do not know is standing among you, taking charge, grabbing your future and unfolding it right in front of you. How do you like that? When you announce this, you're going to get grilled. Luther got it; Jesus got it. If somebody isn't ticked off and asking questions, I always wonder whether I blew it.

One of my dear old students likes to think that Forde and I were voluntaristic, that we went looking for conflict by deliberately proclaiming this in an offensive way. You don't have to add to the offense. The offense is there. Good night. The one whom you do not know is standing among you. What else would you like? If you proclaim the gospel, that the one who forgives your sins, who holds your whole future in his hand, who raises the dead, is standing among you; if you say that, the works-righteous and the false saints are going to run like rats before the morning sun. The bishop is going to get a call, and somebody is going to be down your throat before long.

That's just the name of the game. "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you." Jesus says, What do you expect? Figure it out. But he is sufficient. He is standing among you, with his hands under your shoulders, holding you up, so that like John the Baptist you can stand there and just hand it over. What fun. That's just about as good as it gets.

Well, it's 1:46, and I'm working overtime for you birds. So happy Advent. We'll be back next week with Advent 4, and I suppose Julie and I will have to talk about how we're going to manage Christmas. I know I'm going to stick with you. We're going to have a lot of fun

through this season. I enjoy you people so much, and I look forward to this every week. I ask God's blessing on you as you carry the Word out.

SOURCE

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Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YnxEboXnFV8>

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