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Message of second week of Advent full of urgent hopefulness

by Marty Haugen

Scripture for Life

Marty Haugen's Advent reflections

What a rich and delightful potpourri are our Advent readings! There is a lively and beautiful theological conversation going on each week between the Hebrew Scriptures, the Epistle and the Gospel.

Just two weeks ago on Christ the King Sunday, the Gospel presented Jesus as a king before Pilate. In three weeks the Gospel will portray Jesus as a helpless infant in an occupied country. Advent is a complex season in which scripture offers a number of various understandings of Jesus and the reign that he proclaimed is at hand and is still coming.

Each Advent Sunday in the Hebrew Scriptures, God speaks to Israel (and Judah) through the prophets, promising, and eventually celebrating, a radically new reign of justice, joy and renewal. Each week in the Epistle, Paul (and an unknown writer in the reading for the fourth Sunday) offers words and prayers of encouragement to fledgling Christian communities, including those in Philippi and Thessalonica. The Gospels move us from an end-time prophecy (in the first Sunday) to historical narratives around John the Baptizer (in the second and third Sundays) and Mary (in the fourth Sunday). Exploring how these different voices speak to each other each week is key to a deeper understanding of the meaning of this season. For those of us planning music for Sunday Eucharist, that deeper understanding is an important piece in knowing what music to choose and how to lead that music.

Second Sunday of Advent

Baruch 5:1-9
Psalm 26
Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11
Luke 3:1-6
Full text of the readings

The beautiful first reading (from the apocryphal Book of Baruch) shares much of the same imagery of Isaiah 40. There is an urgency in the message, something we catch in the exclamation, "Up, Jerusalem! stand upon the heights." But it is a call not to war or destruction, but a call to witness God's in-gathering of humanity into a reign of light and mercy and justice.

This week in the Epistle, Paul is writing to the infant Christian community in Philippi, where Christians are undergoing their own trials even as Paul writes to them from prison. Despite that (or maybe because of that), his prayer, as it was in last week's reading to the Thessalonians, is that they might "abound in love, both in understanding and wealth of experience." It is important to remember that Paul and the Philippians believed that Christ's second coming was imminent.

In the Gospel, John the Baptizer repeats the prophecies of Isaiah (and Baruch) in a similar call for urgent preparation. His challenging message is, of course, directed at Jews of Jesus' time, filtered through Luke's writing to the early Christians.

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So where is the conversation between these readings? One obvious congruence is that all the readings are charging the listener (the Israelites of Jeremiah's time, the Jews of Jesus' time, the early church in Philippi and, of course, us) to prepare, urgently and passionately, for a future of hopeful fulfillment. We, along with the Israelites, the Jews with John at the Jordan River, and the persecuted Christians in Philippi, are the listeners. This is a message for us -- a message of urgent hopefulness, here and now.

The beautiful and complex story of Advent and Christmas is a message of God's life with us -- in history, in future hope, and in the here and now. So, given all that, what do we sing to give musical voice to these powerful and prophetic Scriptures?

Just as it is simple to choose only the best-known Christmas carols -- "Silent Night," "O Little Town of Bethlehem" -- which are basically historical pageant texts, it is very tempting not to consider texts for Advent that are more provocative and challenging. Here are two Advent carols that bring the historical narrative into our present life and faith situations.

"Each Winter as the Year Grows Older" is a haunting carol written in the late 1960s by United Church of Christ minister William Gay and organist Annabeth Gay. It probably has more impact for those of us who have seen more winters, but it is powerfully lyric and true remembrance of the message of the entire Gospel (from cradle to cross). The genius of the beautiful text expresses Christian hope in the midst of turmoil and violence and also powerfully yokes romantic images of the infant Jesus with the paschal mystery and the hope of the reign to come. This is an excellent lyric:

O Child of ecstasy and sorrows,
O Prince of peace and pain,
Brighten today's world by tomorrow's,
Renew our lives again;
Lord Jesus, come and reign!

If it is at all possible, this is a Sunday to sing or chant the appointed Psalm text (Psalm 126), giving the assembly the invitation to voice the echo of God's in-gathering that we heard in the Baruch reading. In the psalm, the Israelites are remembering their return from exile in Babylon. The setting "The Lord has Done

Great Things for Us," by Tony Alonso, uses the new Revised Grail text, now approved for Sunday Eucharist.

"Child of Our Dreams," one of my compositions, was intended to offer a more realistic image of Jesus as God incarnate, sharing all our hopes and fears. I was trying to write a very simple carol, with yearning music and a text that might open the reality of the incarnation to the presence of God and the action of God through us: "every nation, every race, every person wears your face" and "Child of all eternity, our justice and our peace, born into our history that hatreds all may cease."

May your own conversations this Advent (within and outside of worship) be as rich, true and fruitful as the word and wisdom we hear this season.

[Marty Haugen is a composer of liturgical music for Roman Catholic and Protestant congregations, with more than 400 compositions published by GIA, Augsburg Fortress and other publishers.]

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