

Life Broken and Poured Out

From the sermon series: Now – But Then

Text: Luke 15:51-52; I Corinthians 13:12

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I am finding that I am entering this season of Advent and this new Christian year with anticipation, and my experience is that that is a growing anticipation and a growing delight in the celebration of the Christian year. I am perhaps just getting older, but I am enjoying the structure of the Christian Year, the form that it gives to my spiritual life and pilgrimage, the life of worship. Obviously, for me whose chief responsibility is worship, I suppose that's understandable, but I would hope that it is true for you, too, that as a people you might even have thought this week, "Advent begins. A new Christian Year begins. The color will be purple. Soon the trees will be dressed, the stars lighted. We'll gather around the table; the Advent wreath will be in our midst."

Those things are becoming increasingly meaningful to me over the years. I had to learn all of that after the fact, because I grew up, as many of you have, in a tradition where the Christian Year was not observed. Oh, well, Christmas, to be sure. Easter, Pentecost, and I think we celebrated Ascension Day, too, because I had to go to church on Thursday night. But, in this old Dutch Reformed Church in which I grew up, we didn't observe the Christian Year because that was Catholic, and even if it'd been 500 years, you can't protest too long! Actually, I was trained that the order for preaching should be the doctrines of the Heidelberg Catechism - Lord's Day by Lord's Day by Lord's Day. And so, if you followed those doctrinal themes, you might be considering the death of Christ in the Advent season, or you might be considering the Holy Spirit during Lent, because you didn't observe Advent or Lent or Eastertide or Christmas as a season of the Christian Year.

But, I'm finding the observance of the Christian Year meaningful. Obviously in the wisdom of the ancient Church, they understood that to go through this cycle was a way of remembering, the way of remembering the way in which God has touched our history. "The Word became flesh, lived among us, died among us, rose among us. The spirit came to dwell within us." You see, the Christian Year puts it in story, in a narrative, and we can live in it and live through it and I'm

simply finding that I am eager to go through the cycle again. We begin this morning, the First Lord's Day of the new Christian Year - the season of Advent.

Advent means "coming." And, of course, four Sundays before Christmas the focus would be the One who came when the Word was made flesh. We are preparing for Christmas. But, the real focus of Advent is not simply the One who came, but that the One who came is the One who is coming. And so, the real theme of Advent is the fact that there is a future and an end. And it is a season in which we are invited to pause, to reflect, to ask in regard to our lives, "What time is it?" In regard to our congregation, "What time is it?" In regard to the society of which we are a part, "What time is it?" In regard to the world and world history, "What time is it?"

Because, as a matter of fact, what the Advent season calls to our mind is the fact that we are people on the move; we are people underway; we are people going somewhere, and something's happening. That was the insight of the Hebrew prophets. Israel gave to the world the sense of history. Over against that was that cyclic sense of reality where things come and go and come and go in endless cycle. But the Hebrews had the insight, "Not so. Beginning, movement, end." And it's fascinating to me that the most recent cosmology, the work of physics, those who study the stars and the planets and all of that deep, deep, mysterious reality of our cosmos - they tell us now that time is irreversible. That means that the best scientific sense of things is now concurring with that biblical sense of things, that there is a point of beginning. There is a movement, an emergence if you will, and an end. Emergence has become a very important word to me. I suggested this summer that it might be a word, an idea that could help us to make more sense of our lives and of history and the cosmos - more sense than the idea of Creation and Fall. I like the idea of Creation and evolutionary development with constant new emergence.

And the Advent season tells us that there is not only this process of movement, this irreversible time line, but there is something out there. We're moving toward something. And so, for the theme of this Advent season, I want the phrase to burn into your consciousness and into your minds, into your heart. NOW, BUT THEN. NOW, BUT THEN. I hope every party you attend, there will be a moment in which you'll think, "Now, but then." I hope with every present you purchase, you'll think, "Now, but then." I hope in whatever quiet moments you can find in this month of December, you'll think, "Now, but then."

I was at a seminar earlier, well last week, and it was a very stimulating couple of days, thinking about our nation. The seminar was entitled, "Shall the Christian Coalition Win?" And there was an evangelical leader, Jim Wallis, who founded the Sojourners community years ago, and Joan Campbell, the Executive Secretary of the National Council of Churches, who is the voice for the mainline churches that seem to be in such trouble, and Alan Boesak from South Africa, who is so intricately involved in the dismantling of Apartheid, and as we were discussing

together the state of the nation, the condition of society, the polarization, the politicization of issues of social welfare and well-being, there were three young men there who were pastors, graduates of Princeton. And as we were talking about our lives and the life of the church and of society, one of these young men said, "Dear God, I can't even get to know my people. My people (he's a pastor in New Jersey, a bedroom community for the city), he said, "My people get on the train at 5, 6 o'clock in the morning, they go into the city, they work all day, they get home 7, 8, 9 o'clock at night, exhausted; they get up in the morning, get on the train, go into the city, come home exhausted." And he said, "They have no time!" And Alan Boesak spontaneously responded, "They are corporate migrants!" And then he went on to explain. Where he comes from in South Africa there are migrant workers who still, out from camps, get on buses five o'clock in the morning, go into the cities, work all day, come home 8, 9 o'clock at night, exhausted, in order to get up in the morning to get on the bus to go into the cities to work in order to come home, exhausted, 8 or 9 o'clock at night. They're migrant workers. But, Alan said, your up-and-outers, your affluent New Jersey corporate executives are also migrants. They're corporate migrants. And I thought to myself, "Isn't it true of us all?"

We came home in the middle of the week and I opened up the calendar to December! It is a disaster! And I thought to myself, I'll be saying to my people on Sunday, Advent is a time of waiting, of anticipating, of preparation for the feast of Christmas, a celebration that the Word became flesh, but more than that, it is a time of waiting, anticipation, preparation for the fact that there is an end out there, that in this evolving, emerging process there is something out there, an endpoint. And I thought, how will we have time, how will we take time? And then I thought perhaps the words of Paul to the Corinthians might keep surfacing in our consciousness, Now, but then, reminding us to ask the question - "What time is it?" What time is it in my life? What time is it in my nation? What time is it in this world of ours? Where are we going? And where will we end? Because we are on the way. It's just that we don't often have a moment to step back and to reflect on the whole thing - What time is it in your life on this first Sunday in Advent?

I can do little more than set the theme this morning. Now Paul says, "We see through a glass darkly." We grope, we see fuzzy images, we have a sense of something, but it's not clear. We can't penetrate through the mystery, the mystery that is life, that is history, that is cosmos. Now, dimly, but then - clearly! Now, he says, we know in part. Dear God, don't we know a lot? Really? When you think of the explosion of knowledge and then when you think of the computer capacity to make that knowledge exponentially more applicable - what a world we live in! What a fascinating time to be alive! Now! Knowledge.

But, the more we know, the more we know we don't know. And it's not as though we edge up to the mystery in order to dissolve it. As we edge up to the mystery, the mystery grows, doesn't it? Now we know in part, but then we will know even as we are fully known.

This Advent season let me try to set this into your mind, this idea - Now, But Then. Now in part; then fully. Now dimly, then clearly. Because, you see, we're going somewhere. Something's happening. There's a process under foot, and we are being moved along in that stream, either unconsciously or, if by God's grace for just a moment we could step back and realize that we are in a process for which we ought to be taking responsibility and living with intention.

What is emerging? That's the other thing I want to say this morning. What is emerging? Well, if we take what Mary thought was emerging, we can look at that *Magnificat*. She thought what was emerging was the gift of the child that she had conceived : a new world, a different kind of world. And it excited her. She praised God! But, as I reflected on the *Magnificat*, dear friends, and I thought how am I going to say this to my people -I realized that the Gospel is Good News, really, for the underdog. Mary was a peasant girl. Mary was one of the voiceless ones. Mary had no power. And what did she celebrate? She celebrated the fact that in her world, in her day, folks like us would be put down so that folks like her would be raised up. Mary's song was a subversive song. He puts down the proud; he lifts up the lowly. He turns away those whose tables are full and brings food to the hungry. That's good news? Really? You got to be one of the underclass to celebrate the Gospel. Unless, unless there's a way for us, the rich and the powerful, to find a way to a new world. Unless, in this Advent season, we who have voice, we who have power, we who call the shots for our world, unless we could come to some kind of negotiation with that emerging future and perhaps even become a part of the movement to bring it into being.

I know what it would cost. It only comes about through life broken and poured out. You see, the child of Mary's womb, whom she celebrated in that anthem, was a child who grew up to be crucified. If you would go into the next chapter of Luke's Gospel, you could see that Luke was already foreshadowing that, because he said to Mary, "A sword will pierce your heart because this one will be a sign spoken again, this one will be for the fall and rising of many in Israel." It's obvious that, in the Christian Church down 2000 years, we still call this the Gospel, we don't understand what it's all about. I mean, it's really obvious, isn't it? The Gospel is about the great reversal. The Gospel is about the creation of a world, a community where everyone has enough and has a voice and has dignity and can live in a community of compassion.

And you know what that would cost? It cost Jesus his life. It cost Gandhi his life. It cost Martin Luther King his life. It cost Bonhoeffer his life. It cost Itzak Rabin his life. Because, you see, our world is organized to hold off the future. Our world, our politics, our social structures - they are put together in order to maintain what is. I like it the way it is. Because the way it is puts me in a place of real privilege, unbelievable privilege. If I would be true to the Gospel, I would become one of those subversives that would undercut the way it is in order that there might emerge a different kind of world. I don't have the blueprint for it. I don't really have the courage for it. But, in this Advent season, I'm going to be just a bit

uneasy about the fact that the cost of that emerging future may involve my life. We've been to the Table; we've taken bread and cup, the sign of life broken and poured out, the sign of our identification with that One. The Good News in all of this is that, if I ever had the courage, the wisdom, the heart to follow Jesus, I would find abundant life. Because in many ways I'm a migrant, too. Life can become that, where I no longer live it out of my insides, but am lived by the outside. Advent - wonderful time of the year to take time, to count the cost and to be drawn by the vision of that life, which is life indeed. I dare you.