Class Notes #6: Advent

**Christian Hope and the Last Day**

Required Readings: Class Notes #5; Buttrick, Chapter 6; Moltmann, Ch. VII (pp. 313-341); Hickman, et al. Ch. 5/C.

Suggested Readings: Douglass, Ch. 2.

Introduction to the Season of Advent

The season of Advent has two theological dimensions: First, it looks forward to the future eschaton, the Second Coming of Christ at the end (*marana tha –* “Come, Lord Jesus!”). The Advent lessons give warnings of the last judgement, and Christians who have the faith in the resurrection anticipate the fulfillment of God’s promise in Christ Jesus with hope. The second dimension of Advent is to look backward to Israel’s expectation of a Messiah (*maran atha* – “The Lord has come!”), the First Coming of Jesus, and the lessons of Advent deals with the preparation for the birth of Jesus Christ with the prophetic voice of John the Baptist in the wilderness.

The two theological dimensions of Advent lead the preacher to consider the following theological questions: 1) What are we waiting for? What do we want to happen, or, what do we hope for? 2) Who are today’s voices in the wilderness? What shall we repent? 3) What do we hear and see as signs of the coming of the Messiah?

The Advent wreath with its four purple candles is a symbol of our hope and repentance. The four candles are identified as “the wheel of hope,” signifying justice, righteousness (or repentance), healing, and peace.

The Parousia and the Christian Hope

The Parousia of Christ is the highlight of Christian theology. It is the Christian anticipation of the consummation of the promise of God in Jesus Christ (I Cor. 16:22; Rev. 22:20, “Come, Lord Jesus. Come soon”). Some Christian sects in church history identified he anticipation of the Parousia with the doomsday vision and counted the date of the last judgmental day of the planet (cf., Hal Lindsey, *The Liberation of Planet Earth*). The lessons during the Advent season, however, teach us to wait for the “year of jubilee,” or the “day of shalom” when God shall bring bondage to an end and heals nature and human history. The Advent season identifies and celebrates the human hopes in our own time that are in continuity with the prophetic pointing to justice for the poor, equity for the meek, and release for the enslaved (cf., James Douglass, *The Nonviolent Coming of God*).

Moltmann reminds us that there is a tension between the apocalyptic expression of the Last Judgment (“the penal law of retaliation,” cf., Matthew 25:31-46) and “the saving gospel of Jesus” (“the prevenient and unconditional love,” cf., Ephesians 2:16; Romans 8:33ff) in the Bible, and that this tension has not been resolved in Christian tradition (336-8). Concerning this dilemma, Moltmann advises that Christians wait for Christ’s judgment as the ending of injustice which is “the precondition for the coming of the eternal kingdom.” In this way of understanding, the Last Judgment is not a terror but “a liberating hope”, so that we can pray that it may come soon (315). Therefore, what we are waiting for is, not the end of the world, but the end of the wretchedness of this world time (321).

Regarding the delay of the Parousia, Moltmann summarizes two theological views. One is the view of “consistent eschatology (or “a temporalized eschatology’) that continues to expect the time of the Second Coming of Christ as “the temporal future” (316). The other view on the delay of the Parousia is “eternalized expectation: every time is the final time . . . supra-temporal and identical with eternity (317). Moltmann argues that the problem with the first view which understands time in a linear order—past, present, and future—is that, if the last day belongs within this kind of time, it cannot bring the end of time. The problem with the second view, argues Moltmann, is that, if the day of the Lord falls in the eternity which is simultaneous to all times, the Parousia cannot happen at a particular time, nor can it end time. Thus, Moltmann asks, “How are we to think of ‘the eschatological moment’ [the last day] which ends time in time?” (328).

As an alternative to these two views, Moltmann presents a different concept of time. For him, God created time together with creation (the moment of inception) (Gen 1:1), and time ends with the world (328). When created time ends and “the time of creation” passes away, all things will be brought back again from time and will be gathered together (329). Moltmann calls this newly created time “the eternal aeon of creation.” While the linear course of time (past, present, future) makes things old, the movement of “the aeonic time of the new creation” is circular and spiral, “transformed from one radiance to another, without growth or decrease,” regenerating everything that lives (331). For Moltmann, just as the Kingdom of God can be foretasted on earth, so the aeon time of the new creation (or the Parousia of Christ) can be foretasted here and now (331).

Therefore, what we are waiting for here and now is glimpses of God’s presence in day-to-day relationships and situations, while also trusting God with the fullness of all that is. How, then, do preachers seek out glimpses of God’s presence? It requires of them spiritual discernment. According to Pamela McCarroll, the discernment of the presence of God is seen with eyes of love, love as openness, attentiveness, and reverence. When we recognize beauty in another, we are glimpsing the beauty or image of God in that other. God, through the lens of the cross, is one who is particularly present in solidarity with those who suffer and are abandoned, humiliated, and betrayed by the power and coercion of the world. So, it is important to pay particular attention to suffering and being in solidarity with those who are suffering in our world, for God is present there (McCarroll, Waiting at the Foot of the Cross, 200). James Douglass sees the glimpses of the Second Coming of Christ in human history. For him, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and Rosa Parks are a few examples who brought the radical nonviolent human transformation through which we glimpse “the nonviolent coming of God” (*The Nonviolent Coming of God*, 48-58).

Advent preaching not only helps the listeners discern the glimpses of coming of God in our daily lives and human history, but also aims to encourage the listeners to practice hope as waiting for today through prayerful living. Prayer is about keeping open to God, and mindfulness of our relationship with God is central. It develops resilience and patience of hope as waiting (McCarroll, 203). Such preaching enables the listeners to embrace the fragility, fallibility, and finitude of our lives by trusting in God, rather than worrying that everything is all about us. It is an invitation to the way of being in relationship with others on the journey toward the fulfillment of God’s promise in Christ Jesus.