Class Notes #6: Advent

**Christian Hope and the Last Day**

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Required Readings: Class Notes #6; Buttrick, Chapter 6; Moltmann, Ch. VII (pp. 313-41);

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. One is that it looks forward to the future eschaton, the Second Coming of Christ at the end (*marana tha –* “Come, Lord Jesus!”). Advent lessons give warnings of the last judgement, and Christians who have faith in the resurrection anticipate the fulfillment of God’s promise in Christ Jesus with hope. The other dimension of Advent is that it looks backward to Israel’s expectation of a Messiah (*maran atha* – “The Lord has come!”), that is, the First Coming of Jesus. The lessons of Advent focus on the preparation for the birth of Jesus Christ via 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? 3) of what shall we repent? 4) What do we hear and see as signs of the coming of the Messiah?

The Advent wreath with its four 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.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The *Parousia* and Christian Hope

The *parousia* of Christ is the highpoint of Christian theology. It is the Christian anticipation of the consummation of the promise of God in Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 16:22; Rev. 22:20, “Come, Lord Jesus. Come soon”). In church history, some Christian groups have identified the anticipation of the *parousia* with a doomsday vision and have predicted the date of the Last Judgement 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 heal all creation, and creatures both human and non-human. Advent identifies and celebrates hope in our own time 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 in the Bible there is a tension between the apocalyptic expression of the Last Judgment (“the penal law of retaliation,” cf., Mt. 25:31-46) and “the saving gospel of Jesus” (“the prevenient and unconditional love,” cf., Eph. 2:16; Rom. 8:33ff), and says that this tension has not been resolved in Christian theology (336-8). Concerning this dilemma, Moltmann explains that the Last Judgment is not a terror, but “a liberating hope,” and advises that Christians see Christ’s judgment as the end of injustice, which is “the precondition for the coming of the eternal kingdom” (315). What we are waiting for, therefore, is not the end of the world, but “the end of the wretchedness of this world time,” and we pray that the Christ come soon (321).

Regarding the delay of the *parousia*, Moltmann summarizes two theological views. One holds a “consistent eschatology (or “a temporalized eschatology”), in which the time of the Second Coming of Christ is expected 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). According to Moltmann, the problem with the first view is given time is understood in a linear order (the past, the present, and the future), the last day cannot bring the end of time. The problem with the second view is, if the day of the Lord falls in an eternity that is simultaneous with all times, the *parousia* cannot happen at a particular time, nor can it end time. Moltmann thus 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. He holds that God created time together with creation (the moment of inception) (Gen. 1:1), and that time ends with the world (328). When created time ends and “the time of creation” passes away, says Moltmann, all things will be brought back 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 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). In this concept of time, just as the kingdom of God can be tasted afore on earth, so the aeon time of the new creation (or the *parousia* of Christ) can be tasted afore here and now (331).

What we are waiting for here and now, therefore, is glimpses of God’s presence in day-to-day relationships and situations. How, then, do preachers seek out glimpses of God’s presence? It requires spiritual discernment, as well as trusting God with the fullness of all that is. Pamela McCarroll’s book, Waiting at the Foot of the Cross, is a helpful resource in discerning the presence of God. In her view, God is seen with eyes of love, that is, “openness, attentiveness, and reverence.” When we recognize beauty in another, we glimps the beauty or image of God in that other. Through the lens of the cross, we find God present in solidarity with those who are abandoned, humiliated, and betrayed by the power and coercion of the world (200).

In his book, *The Nonviolent Coming of God,* James Douglass also helps us catch glimpses of the Second Coming of Christ in human history. He sees Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and Rosa Parks as a few examples of those who brought radical nonviolent human transformation, through which we glimpse “the nonviolent coming of God” (48-58).

Advent sermons should not only help listeners discern glimpses of the coming of God in our past and present times, but also encourage them to live prayerful lives with hope as waiting for the Day of the Lord. As McCarroll reminds us, prayer is opening ourselves to God and being mindful of our relationships with God and with others (203). This kind of sermon enables listeners to embrace the fragility, fallibility, and finitude of their lives and invites them to trust in God.

1. Traditionally, the four candles symbolizes hope (purple), love (purple), joy (pink), and peace (purple). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)