Class Notes #6: Advent

**Christian Hope and the Last Day**

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* Required Readings: Buttrick, Chapter 6.
* Recommended Readings: Moltmann, Ch. VII (pp. 313-341); Hickman, et al. Ch. 5/C; Long and McCray.

Introduction to the Season of Advent

 The season of Advent has two theological dimensions. The first dimension 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 judgment, and Christians who have faith in the resurrection anticipate the fulfillment of God's promise in Christ Jesus with hope. The second 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. So, the lessons of Advent focus on preparing for the birth of Jesus Christ.

 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) 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 symbolizes 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 the Christian Hope

The *parousia* of Christ is the high point 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*). However, the lessons during the Advent season 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 to the end of injustice, which is "the precondition for the coming of the eternal kingdom" (315). Therefore, what we are waiting for is not the end of the world, but "the end of the wretchedness of this world time," and we pray that 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 that if the Lord's day 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 time ends and "the time of creation" passes away, says Moltmann, all things will be brought back from time and 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 [kin-dom] 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, are 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 and trusting God with the fullness of all that is. In her book, Waiting at the Foot of the Cross, Canadian theologian Pamela McCarroll says that we can see God through eyes of love--"openness, attentiveness, and reverence." When we recognize beauty in another, we glimpse the beauty or image of God in that other. Through the lens of the cross, we find God present in solidarity with the abandoned, humiliated, and betrayed by the power and coercion of the world (200).

Advent sermons should help listeners discern glimpses of the coming of God in our past and present times and 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 others (203). This kind of sermon enables listeners to embrace the fragility, fallibility, and finitude of their lives and invites them to trust God.

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