

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN



GIFT *and* TASK

A Year of Daily Readings
and Reflections

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for Tia



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PREFACE



The title I have given this book, “Gift and Task,” is a translation of the more felicitous German, *Gabe und Aufgabe*. The God whom we meet in Scripture is one who gives generous gifts in the wonder of creation, in the miracle of emancipation and reconciliation, and in the surprise of transformation. Human persons, along with all other creatures, are recipients of those abundant gifts of God that are to be taken in awed gratitude, for which our best word from Greek is “Eucharist.” This gift-giving God whom we meet in Scripture is also the one who assigns a worthy task, who from the first act of creation and the first utterance at Sinai has issued commandments, who has summoned to discipleship, and who empowers to glad, trustful obedience.

What follows in this book is a daily reflection on the Scriptures prescribed in the Daily Office for Year 2 in the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*, the Daily Readings in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *Book of Common Worship*, and perhaps other traditions as well. Of course the exact dates of the church year change because Easter is a movable feast and Advent changes with the calendar, so in this book I have ordered the readings according to the church year that begins in Advent of 2017. I have judged that the specificity of that one particular year was worth the requirement of agility among readers for use in subsequent years, and I am counting on purists to pardon the inevitable variations from prescribed readings that result.

Suggestions for adapting this resource for use in subsequent years can be found in appendix A.

In many of these study reflections, it will be most beneficial to read the biblical text before reading the study material. It is preferable, when possible, to read the text out loud, as biblical texts are meant for hearing. I have exercised freedom in selecting which text or texts from among the designated readings I would comment on each day. Readers of my work will not be surprised that my tilt and inclination are toward Old Testament texts. With only a few exceptions, I have not commented on the psalm for each day, as I have had ample opportunity elsewhere to exposit the Psalms. I have taken the liberty of selecting texts from Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), because it is quite fresh material for me and because Ben Sira is an uncompromisingly practical theologian and moral teacher. Mindful that these texts are not included in many Protestant Bibles, I have provided the text to those passages from Sirach in appendix B.

What I have written is intentionally distinguished in two ways. First, I have written reflections that are intended for serious church members who are willing to consider in critical ways the cost and joy of discipleship. This means that I have resisted any temptation toward a more generic “devotional,” because most materials offered in that genre are, in my judgment, quite romantic. Second, while I have not imposed much critical scholarship on the texts, I intend that my exposition should be critically responsible and not excessively accommodating to popular itches.

While I follow the daily readings designated by certain church bodies, I, of course, hope that my commentary will reach a larger reading community that is genuinely ecumenical, as no tradition has a monopoly on serious attention to Scripture. Thus I hope my exposition makes room across the theological, ecclesial spectrum for “progressives” and “evangelicals,” for we commonly share as recipients of the wondrous gifts of God, and we are commonly addressed by the summons of the God of the gospel. It is my conviction—and hope—that serious Scripture reading is and can be a source of missional renewal in the church.

I am glad again as always to voice my thanks to David Dobson, Julie Tonini, Jessica Miller Kelley, and their colleagues at Westminster John Knox Press for the faithful and attentive way in which they have transposed my words into a book.

I am pleased to dedicate this book to the well-beloved Tia Brueggemann. She has been engaged with this writing project all the way from its inception (her idea) to final authorial editing (her work), with sustaining energy in between. I am grateful to a host of persons who have made it possible for me to undertake this reading. That includes many pastors, teachers, and nourishing traditions; as indicated in my commentary for the last day of the church year, it most especially includes the tradition of German evangelical pietism that is my true home.

Walter Brueggemann
Columbia Theological Seminary
July 2016



ADVENT



ADVENT 1

First Sunday of Advent

Psalm 146; Amos 1:1–5, 13–2:8; 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11; Luke 21:5–19

God of all our beginnings, we thank you for this new beginning in Advent. Give us the freedom and courage to enter into your newness that exposes the inadequacy of where we have been and what we have done in time past. Be the God of all truth in our midst. Through Christ. Amen.



We rightly expect that Christmas will go “out like a lamb.” What comes from Christmas is indeed the Lamb that is slaughtered on Friday who is worthy of praise on Sunday, who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29; Rev. 5:12). Before that, however, Advent is “in like a lion,” a roaring truthfulness that disrupts our every illusion.

The text from Amos begins, “The LORD roars from Zion.” The image is of a lion (from the temple in Jerusalem) who is seeking prey, thus a threat to the status quo. What follows in the poetry of Amos is an exposé of the sociopolitical failures of Israel’s neighbors and of Israel. The offenses of Damascus (Syria) and Moab and Ammon (Jordan) bespeak violation of human rights and savage military assault. The affront of Israel is economic: “trampling the head of the poor.”

Such texts assure that our preparation for Christmas is not a safe, private, or even familial enterprise but is preoccupied with great public issues of war and peace and issues of economic justice that concern the worth and bodily well-being of human persons. Our Advent preparation may invite us to consider the ways in which we ourselves are complicit in the deep inhumanity of our current world. All these texts attest a coming upheaval because the roaring lion can wait no longer. The lion opens space for the Lamb, who will arrive soon.

Monday after Advent 1

Psalm 1; Amos 2:6–16; 2 Peter 1:1–11; Matthew 21:1–11

Your coming, O God, evokes in us joy as we ponder your new rule of mercy and justice. Your coming at the same time confronts us with a deep shattering of the way we have arranged our common life. Grant that we may not default on joy or flinch from the shattering that your coming portends. In Christ. Amen.



The Gospel reading voices a vigorous welcome for the new king. The crowd is eager for his arrival. The juxtaposition of the Amos text and the Epistle reading, however, suggests that not everyone gathered to cheer his arrival. The epistle expresses an ethic that is congruent with his new rule: virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, and “brotherly affection with love.” The conduct of those who sign on with the coming Messiah concerns discipline that serves the common good, brotherly affection, that is, social solidarity.

That ethic, to be performed by Jesus and embraced by his faithful community, contradicts what the prophetic tradition found in ancient Israel. Amos indicts the economy for uncaring exploitation of the poor, for self-indulgent sexuality, and for cynical abuse of holy things for self-service. As a contrast to such demonstrative self-indulgence, Amos cites the Nazirites, a company of the young under strict discipline.

The prophetic text and the Epistle reading together articulate a powerful either-or that might preoccupy us in Advent. On the one hand, we live in a predatory economy that operates without restraint or compassion. On the other hand, the epistle anticipates that Jesus’ company of followers will refuse such a way in the world that can result only in failure and jeopardy. The way in which we may “confirm our call and election” is by alternative ethic that refuses the ordinary practices of our consumer economy that endlessly negates the poor.

Tuesday after Advent 1

Psalm 5; Amos 3:1–11; 2 Peter 1:12–21; Matthew 21:12–22

God of the prophets, who interrupts and makes new beginnings, we thank you for prophetic words that continue to sound among us. Give us attentive minds and hearts, that we may heed when addressed and obey when summoned, in the name of the living Word. Amen.



Jesus is in the temple, the citadel of entitlement and certitude. He himself is here located in the prophetic tradition. He deftly combines two prophetic utterances, a hope-filled word from Isaiah, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (56:7), and a word of judgment from Jeremiah (7:11), “Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers.” He does more, however, than quote the prophets. He effectively performs their words that judge the temple as a venue of exploitation and that anticipate a revised temple of embracive faith. His performance of prophetic reality is compelling enough that he evokes a confrontation with the “chief priests and scribes,” managers of the citadel. They sense, quite rightly, that something dangerous and subversive is stirring around Jesus, specified by the messianic affirmation on the lips of the “children in the temple.”

Prophetic speech breaks open our settled opinions, our treasured ideologies, and our uncritical social practice. Thus Amos condemned the “violence and robbery” of a systemic kind. And the Epistle reading presents prophetic words as “a lamp shining in a dark place.”

Our world is “a dark place” of fear, anxiety, greed, and violence. The prophetic light exposes such destructive practices and requires us to consider both the ideological rootage of our practices and their concrete outcomes from which we often benefit. Advent is a time for being addressed from “elsewhere” and being unsettled. It is a time to ponder exposés that we do not welcome. Sometimes we are like priests and scribes resisting the raw word of God’s intrusion that shatters our citadels.

Wednesday after Advent 1

Psalm 119:1–14; Amos 3:12–4:5; 2 Peter 3:1–10; Matthew 21:23–32

Lord of eons and immediacy, we wait with some impatience for Christmas celebration while our commercial world is already at its fake celebration. Grant us patience to be geared to your time that is both slow and sure. In his name. Amen.



These readings seek to find a proper place for trust amid two temptations. On the one hand, there is the seduction of phony piety. Jesus warns against an eager ostensive obedience without follow-through. The prophet Amos ups the rhetoric to mock the busy routines of piety that his contemporaries love to enact. He sees, moreover, that such exhibitionist piety is readily linked to economic exploitation. The Epistle reading, on the other hand, identifies an alternative temptation, namely, skepticism. The writer points to “scoffers” who mock faith by pointing out that the promises of God are never kept and that things go on and on as they were without interruption or change.

Both of these temptations have to be faced with Christmas coming. Among us, phony piety may take the form of excessive generosity, of giving gifts without any real passion, both gifts to those who need no gifts (whom we may not love too much) and gifts to the needy that are less than serious engagement. It is likely, however, that the temptation to skepticism about a real coming of newness is more poignant among us. The result may be just going through the motions of tired celebration.

The Gospel reading uses the term “believe” three times, describing an act of trust that leads to repentance. Christmas is properly not about phony piety or about skepticism; it is about change of heart and change of life that are rooted in trust in the promises of God that are as sure as they are slow.

Thursday after Advent 1

Psalms 18:1–20; Amos 4:6–13; 2 Peter 3:11–18; Matthew 21:33–46

Grant, good Lord, that we may receive you in your hidden majestic power that runs beyond our imagining. Forgive us that we domesticate you in order to accommodate the worlds we prefer. Give to us your new world of well-being. In his name. Amen.



These readings invite us to be at the pivot point in the life of the world, poised between what is old and passing and what is new and emerging. The hard words of prophetic speech concern the undoing and dismantling of a world that is failed. Thus Amos can chronicle the undoing by environmental crises that leave us as desolate as Sodom and Gomorrah. In his parable Jesus imagines that status as God's people with blessings of chosenness will be taken away, forfeited in disobedience.

This same moment, however, is one of radical newness. The newness consists in new heaven and new earth, a cosmic emergence of well-being that the creator has always intended. That new world of well-being will not be according to common expectation. The “stone rejected,” judged inadequate by conventional norms, will be Jesus, the Messiah, who fits none of our expectations.

To stand in that vortex of divine resolve requires some intentional preparation. The epistle urges specific disciplines of “holiness and godliness,” being “without spot or blemish,” being “at peace,” growing in “grace and knowledge.” This means to be focused in a way very different from our careless society that does not think anything will be undone and does not anticipate any deep newness. It is the peculiar invitation of the gospel that we may be witnesses and recipients of a turn of the ages. Only the disciplined can perceive and receive. Homework is required.

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