The Poetry of Advent

Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8
Lethbridge Mennonite Church
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December 6, 2020/Second Sunday of Advent

On Monday night, I got an email from a friend that I met while attending grad school in Vancouver way back in 2005.

A bunch of my former colleagues in BC were getting together for a Zoom meeting later that night. Would I and another friend now pastoring in Alberta (who used to be in BC) want to join in? We could be like the "Alberta chapter" of the BC gathering.

I consulted my calendar and discovered that it was just as I suspected. It was still 2020 and my social calendar was still a barren wasteland. ☺ Sure, I'd be happy to join.

It was an interesting few hours. It was great to see some familiar faces that I hadn't seen in years and some new ones that I hadn't met. One had recently retired and was struggling with the "what now?" question. Another was doing interim pastoral work. Two had recently resigned due to church conflict of some form or another, including one fairly young pastor.

The conversation meandered across some fairly wide terrain. We talked about the pandemic (obviously), about church politics, about some of the differences between Alberta and BC realities.

We also just reminisced. At one point, one of the older guys in the meeting was talking about a particularly colourful co-pastor he had at one point in his career. This was evidently the kind of person who marched to the beat of their own drum and never really lasted too long at any one church.

"We were at a conference once," he said, "and I noticed him talking to a much older esteemed theologian from our conference. I wondered what on earth they were talking about! Later, I tracked down the esteemed theologian to see what he made of his conversation with my young co-pastor. He just shook his head and said they were talking about some important issue, but

they hadn't really been able to find any common ground or even shared language to approach it with. I told him, "ah, well that's because he's not a theologian like you, he's a poet!"

We all kind of chuckled at the image of this somewhat naïve, idealistic young pastor using all kinds of flowery language in a conversation with this buttoned-down, serious, rational theologian. He probably had no idea that the older gentleman he was talking to had written entire books about the issue that he was waxing on about!

Then the young guy in our Zoom meeting—the guy who had just resigned from his church—typed something in the chat box at the bottom of the screen: "I just had an idea for a title for my memoir: "Sorry, there's no room for poets in the church."

We laughed again, although this time a bit more awkwardly. At least that was the case for me.

I wondered about what pain might be behind a comment like that. How many times had this young man been told to save his flowery words because there were important church matters to discuss? How many times had he felt like his dreams and visions of God had to take a back seat to more pragmatic concerns? How many times had he been told to leave the important work to the theologians or the church administrators or the businessmen?

I'm speculating, of course. I have no idea what this young man had experienced.

But the more I thought about his comment in the chat box, the more I thought, "How sad! How sad that there was no room for a poet in his church! How sad that such a thing could even be conceivable!"

No room for poets in the church?! It's absurd to think about. The church has always had poets, always *needed* poets to tell the truth, to imagine what could be, to give language and artistic expression to the things of God.

Perhaps the church needs poets now more than ever. We have never had access to so much information, so many people claiming to tell the truth yet we often don't trust what we hear, whether it's from scientists or the media or politicians or clergy.

We need those who can inspire our imaginations, evoke awe and longing, kindle within us a hunger for God that a dry rationalism is incapable of doing.

Poetry have always been one of the means through which God gets through to his people, how longing for justice and goodness and beauty and hope have been expressed and evoked.

If God had wanted to present humanity with a technical "salvation manual" (which is what some suppose the bible is) I suppose it could have been done, and probably with a few less words than our bibles contain. Maybe it could have even come via bullet points (wouldn't that have been handy?!).

But instead, we get a sprawling, at times disjointed and awkward narrative of God's interactions with human beings over vast stretches of time.

And we get poetry. We get word pictures and symbolism and language that sets the imagination soaring. Read the Song of Solomon, if you have any doubts. Or the Psalms. Or parts of the prophets. Or the book of Revelation with its visions and dreams of a future we can scarcely even comprehend.

Parts of our texts this morning are pure poetry. Listen again to the words of Isaiah:

> Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.
>
> He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

These are not literal descriptions of what's going to be going on geologically or agriculturally when God comes to make all things new.

It is a poetic way of pointing to a future of justice, where the lowly are raised up and the powerful brought low, of that which was once frustrated human flourishing now being removed.

It is a poetic way of describing a future of safety, comfort, rest, security.

Isaiah is not offering a blow-by-blow prediction of the specifics of the eschaton. He is drilling down into the depths of the human heart, tapping into God's deepest desires for his creation, and speaking the divine word about the faithfulness of God that is stronger and more determined than all of our sin.

Jen used a bit of today's Psalm, Psalm 85, in her call to worship earlier. I'd like to read a longer portion of it:

> Let me hear what God the Lord will speak,
> for he will speak peace to his people,
> to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.
>
> Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
> that his glory may dwell in our land.
>
> Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
> righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
>
> Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
> and righteousness will look down from the sky.

What a beautiful few verses! This vision of love and faithfulness, righteousness and peace coming together in a kiss gathers up the entire scope of human longing together into a single memorable image.

Poetry says things that can't be said in more prosaic language.

Christian Wiman is a poet and a professor at Yale Divinity School. He has this to say about how poetry is sometimes the most suitable language for giving expression to the most important things about God, faith, and life:

> The way the rhymes and near rhymes stitch the perceptions together; the way those perceptions are both discovered and fulfilled by the form; the way a consummate articulation includes an irreducible silence, and extreme intimacy, an inevitable "distance"; and, finally, the way the human heart and the heart of the matter have something to say to each other.[1]

I love that last part. "The way the human heart and the heart of the matter have something to say to each other."

[1] Christian Wiman, *He Held Radical Light: The Art of Faith, the Faith of Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2018), 14.

This is what Isaiah 40 and Psalm 85 are, in their own unique ways, expressing.

The deepest longings of the human heart—for justice, peace, faith, hope, and love—are made to come together and will come together when God comes in fullness.

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So, we need poetry to remind us that the human heart and the heart of the matter have something to say to each other.

But Scripture gives us more than poetry.

It also gives us voices of stark clarity. It gives us blunt reminders that we have a role to play as well.

Voices like John the Baptist howling from the wilderness, calling for repentance, preparing the way for the coming Messiah and his kingdom.

This is the voice that Isaiah foretold: A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

God is coming to change the landscape.

But part of the change in the landscape is a change in *us*! We are a part of the landscape that needs to be changed.

In Scripture, poetic imagery of the future to which we are called is rarely found without the simultaneous call to repentance and personal transformation in the present.

Whether it is the nation of Israel or the church, the people of God are always part of the problem that needs to be fixed.

This isn't as nice to hear, I know. "Repentance" is not a popular word, nor is any suggestion that there is anything wrong with us.

It is one thing to protest against abstractions like racism or institutional greed or environmental degradation, but we're not often fond of the spotlight being turned on ourselves.

And yet we must.

Mark and Isaiah belong together. The poet and the prophet belong together.

Isaiah's message is one of comfort for a beleaguered people suffering in the "wilderness" of exile. It is a reminder that their God will one day lift up every valley, that the ground will become level and smooth.

These are geological metaphors that speak about God lifting the lowly and humbling the proud. They speak about no more reasons for protest—about their being enough for all, about no more huge gap between the rich and powerful and the poor and the weak, about sin and selfishness no longer determining the shape of our reality.

This is good news for those who are used to being on the losing side, those used to things not going their way. It is good news for those used to being the victims of the big and the powerful.

But Isaiah's voice needs to be heard alongside Mark's. Mark reminds us that the voice in the wilderness signaling the coming of God is also a call for taking self-inventory and repenting for all of the ways that our lives do not match what God is seeking to accomplish in his world.

It is a call to repent for the ways in which our greed and complacency, our impatience and failure to love, our idolatry, and our faithlessness contribute to the pain and brokenness of our world.

Mark's voice reminds us that Advent is not a prolonged shopping season with colourful lights and pleasant Christmas music, and heartwarming winter scenes, but one that has historically been a time of *penitence*.

Advent isn't just the preamble to Christmas. It is a time to ask searching questions of ourselves, and to once again commit ourselves to Jesus' way of living in a world that still waits for its redemption to be complete.

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My hunch is that especially as a year like 2020 draws to a close, most of us are drawn more to the poetry of Isaiah and Psalm 85's vision of righteousness and peace coming together in a kiss than John the Baptist's bracing call to repentance.

Perhaps given all of that we've endured and the prospect of a very different Christmas season than any of us have experienced, we simply need this hope of better days coming, of a future that comes not as an accomplishment but as the gift of God.

I feel this.

But we must never forget that Advent is about changing the landscape—both in the world, and in our own lives.

Even in a year as ugly as 2020, we need this invitation to ponder the crooked and uneven places in our own lives that could use straightening as we prepare the way for Jesus this Advent season.

Isaiah's and Mark's call are not two different calls. They are all part of the same call—the same Advent reality of a God who comes to rescue his broken and hurting world, his broken and hurting children.

The same Advent hope of faithfulness springing up from the ground and righteousness and peace coming together in a fusion of love.

This is the grand poetry of Advent. This is the hope that our lives are to be aligned with.

It sounds impossible. It sounds too good to be true. But this is why we need poetry—to lift our hearts toward the heart of the matter, to draw us into impossible things.

And to remind us that, as the angel Gabriel told a frightened and confused Mary at the news that she would give birth to the Saviour, "Nothing is impossible with God."

This is as true in 2020 as it was in two thousand years ago.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.