“Advent and Prolepsis”

A sermon by Kirk Wegter-McNelly for the BU School of Theology Weekly Chapel Service
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Advent is a season of preparation, a season of expectation, a season of anticipation. New life is coming, and not just a single new life, but new life for all creation! The redemption of the world is at hand, the day of salvation is drawing near! Incarnation, Immanuel, God with us. That day, that glorious day – Christmas! – when bud will burst into blossom, when sounds of rejoicing will fill the air. The earth is readying itself to repeat the sounding joy. So grab hold of your bell rope and get ready to pull. Pull like there’s no tomorrow, because when Christmas comes, I mean when it really comes, there will be no tomorrow. There will be, only and forever more, Christmas Day.

And all the bells on earth shall ring,
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day;
And all the bells on earth shall ring,
On Christmas Day in the morning.

Advent is the Christian season of anticipation. By returning to this season, year after year, we train ourselves to anticipate – not just during Advent but over the whole course of our lives – a future in which all humanity responds with joy to the news that God is with us, that God is for us.

The idea of “anticipation” orients us toward the future during Advent, but this season is also about the past. Anticipating Christmas, after all, is about “waiting” for an event that took place over two thousand years ago. We Christians are now engaged in a curious, temporally inverted mode of “waiting,” which is not unique to Advent or even to Christianity. In fact, it is integral to the very human act and feeling of anticipation. To anticipate is “to look forward to,” but to anticipate is also to invoke the past, in particular, our memories of the past. Without those memories, we would have no way of naming the future prior to its arrival, no way of experiencing the future as “the future” – we could only stare uncomprehendingly into the temporal “not yet.” Anticipation turns this “not yet” into “the future,” and in so doing imparts a certain kind of power – the power to focus our energies for the sake of a not-yet-present reality. Anticipation also brings with it a certain kind of joy – the joy that comes from the awareness that something new is on the horizon.

If anticipation feels natural and pleasurable to most of us as adults, we shouldn’t forget how painful it can be to learn as children. The other day my son, Keller, and I went Christmas shopping. On the way home, he insisted that we give his mother’s presents to her immediately, when we got home. I thought about this for a moment and then, being the oh-so-clever parent, suggested that he could ask her whether she wanted them now or later. “If she doesn’t want
them now,” I cautioned, “you’ll need to accept that.” “Okay, Dad.” When we arrived home, Jennifer indeed said that she would rather wait, but then she went off my imagined script and commented that she had also recently bought some presents for Keller! Having graciously accepted her preference, he reasoned that she should honor his as well. “I want to open my presents right now,” he said. When Jennifer did not acquiesce, there followed a five-year-old tirade that was entirely justified – and entirely my fault. I will spare you the details, but suffice it to say that later at dinner Keller announced, still in tears, that it would be much better if we simply did not speak of presents or buy any for each other until the very last day before Christmas.

Why do young children feel frustration rather than joy at the prospect of planning ahead for Christmas? Keller felt this way, I think, at least in part because he does not yet have the storehouse of memories that I take for granted when I frame the meaning of that day for myself. Being able to look forward to the future as the future requires remembering the past as clearly once having been the future. It is a complicated business, this sense of anticipation that we come to cherish: past, present, and future all woven tightly together into an intense little psychological bundle of meaning. I now understand, by the way, what candy-filled Advent Calendars are for: they help children learn the art of anticipation by creating memories that are within a young mind’s reach: chocolate yesterday, chocolate today, chocolate tomorrow! In the life of a five-year-old, a day’s worth of anticipation is enough.

As adults, we learn how to wield our religious traditions’ visions of the future for the sake of navigating the present, even as we understand that those visions emerged long before our own pasts were ever anticipated as the future. We also learn how to use these visions to understand and make meaning of our own pasts. A friend of mine calls these “eschatological memories” (see Ted A. Smith, The New Measures: A Theological History of Democratic Practice, Cambridge University press, 2007). From a Christian point of view, God is at the heart of such “memories,” such visions of the world’s future. God is the one who transforms our present and redefines our past, both from the future and as the future. There is a word theologians use to name this power. That word is “prolepsis.” In the Greek it simply means to anticipate or take beforehand, but over the history of Christian thought it has come to mean the manifestation of God’s future for all creation through a concrete, specific pre-actualization of that future in the now. One might say, for example, that Paul uses “proleptic” imagery in his First Letter to the Corinthians when he calls the resurrection of Christ the “first fruits of those who have died” (1 Cor. 15:20). As a theological concept, prolepsis undermines any simplistic, overly linear understanding of time. Prolepsis complexifies the relationships among past, present, and future, and points us especially toward the power of the future to shape the present and reshape the past. This power of God as the world’s future breaking into the present, this prolepsis, is at the root of the human experience of anticipation and of the joy we associate with the season of Advent.

Today’s scripture reading from the third chapter of Luke recounts a strikingly proleptic moment in the larger Advent narrative: the proclamation and ministry of John the Baptist. When the Word of God came proleptically to John in the wilderness, John responded by proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Using the words of Isaiah, Luke identifies
John as the one who “prepares the way of the Lord.” But Luke’s careful chronological juxtaposition of John’s own ministry with the reign of human rulers suggests that, for Luke, at least, Jesus’ ministry actually begins with John. That is *prolepsis*: John’s ministry heralding Jesus’ future ministry through a concrete, specific *pre-actualization* of that future. John baptized with water, even as he called attention to the coming one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. John preached repentance, even as he insisted that he was not worthy to untie the sandal of the one to come. And John judged those who came looking for a loophole, even as he envisioned a winnowing fork in the hand of the one who would follow. John was a *proleptic* prophet.

What is clear about John’s anticipation of Jesus, as well as his call for others to do the same, is that he did not regard the task as a matter of passively waiting around for God to act at some unknown point *in the future*. Instead, he went “into all the region around Jordan, proclaiming...” the good news and calling for repentance (Lk 3:3). Anticipation, *proleptic anticipation*, is not about waiting quietly for the coming one. The power of prolepsis sets anticipation in motion. We see this in peripatetic John himself, but we also see it in his opinion of those who sought him out. In John’s estimation, baptism was not a way of deflecting God’s judgment, but a suitable marker only for those who had already repented. Even though the coming one had not yet appeared, John expected God’s power already to be at work in the world around him through acts of repentance.

When asked by the crowds what this repentance should look like, John responded with simple and straightforward declarations: those who have food and clothing should share them with those who do not; toll collectors should collect only what the government requires; and soldiers should stop extorting people. At the heart of John’s message was a call for people to honor each other as children of God, a call that took inspiration from the prophets of his own Jewish tradition and one that anticipated Jesus’ later message and ministry. John’s baptism of repentance conveyed the presence of God’s cleansing power in people’s lives at that moment, even as it oriented them to a greater power yet to come. John’s message and ministry echoed the Word of God, yet to be fully spoken.¹

How might John the Baptist be a model for us in our own lives and ministries? Can we learn to proleptically anticipate Christ’s coming with such clarity and boldness in our own time, for our own context? Let me suggest one possibility by way of a story. In 2004 a local religious organization in Boston, the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO), partnered with another local advocacy organization, Health Care for All, to form MassACT (Affordable Care Today!), a coalition dedicated to health care reform in Massachusetts. At the federal level, efforts to reform the U.S. health care system had come to a halt in 1994 under the Clinton administration. Since that earlier failure, and with the subsequent shift to a Republican administration in the White House, the conventional wisdom was that serious change to our ailing health care system would be impossible into the foreseeable future. But the problems associated with the system didn’t go away.

¹ I thank Jennifer Wegter-McNelly for this turn of phrase.
At house meetings organized by GBIO in the early 2000s for low- and moderate-income residents of the Boston area, people frequently complained about the difficulty of getting and keeping health insurance. Some could not get insurance because they were unemployed; others were employed but could not afford their portion of the premiums. These meetings led to further conversations among the GBIO leaders—rabbis, imams, priests, ministers, and lay leaders—about whether or not there was anything GBIO might do with regard to health care. They looked to their pasts for guidance from their faith traditions about how to understand the oppressive power of social systems that leave some bodies broken and unhealed. They looked to the future for the fulfillment of God’s promise to order the world in such a way that every child of God is valued and given the attention and care they deserve. When GBIO was approached by Health Care for All about the possibility of joining forces to put a voter initiative for universal health care on the state ballot in 2006, it responded with a risk-taking, anticipating “Yes.”

The initiative developed by Health Care for All, GBIO, and MassAct essentially said that every resident of Massachusetts should get health insurance and that people with sufficiently low incomes should have their insurance subsidized by the state. The plan was to collect 100,000 signatures over the course of a year—the number needed to get an initiative on the ballot in Massachusetts—and then to use these signatures as leverage. The coalition wanted to be able to say to the state legislature: “Work with us to pass a health care reform bill, or we’ll go around you by putting one on the ballot.” A year later, in 2005, they succeeded in convincing Salvatore DiMasi, then the Massachusetts House Speaker, to introduce legislation into the House, and he modeled his bill directly on their initiative. By the fall of 2005, both the Massachusetts House and Senate had passed similar bills, and by the summer of 2006 Governor Romney signed a final bill that established nearly universal health care in Massachusetts. This new law established a “business” mandate that imposed a penalty on businesses failing to offer insurance to their employees, as well as an “individual” mandate that imposed a similar penalty on individuals who failed to buy some form of health insurance. MassAct subsequently negotiated with the state to require individuals to buy insurance only if it was affordable, given their income—so as to avoid criminalizing poverty—and only if the insurance plan met a certain minimum standard of care. The coalition even developed an “affordability schedule,” based on data gathered at GBIO house meetings, that was eventually adopted by the state.

Remarkably, the so-called “Massachusetts health care experiment” has reopened the door to reform at the national level. The U.S. House of Representatives recently passed a health care reform bill, and the U.S. Senate is presently debating its own version. And guess what? Both bills include the basic features of the Massachusetts legislation, which grew directly out of the Health Care for All GBIO initiative: a business mandate, an individual mandate, an affordability schedule, and of minimum standard for benefits. There are lots of politicians in Massachusetts and Washington who are eager to take credit for breaking the logjam around health care in this country, but people on the ground know that communities of faith wrestling with their circumstances, their traditions, and their hopes for the future played a crucial role in setting this recent process into motion. Thanks in no small part to the persistence and vision of GBIO,
this country may soon move one significant step closer to universal health care – a reality that citizens in most first-world countries take for granted and one that follows straightforwardly, in my estimation, from John’s and Jesus’ injunctions to love and care for one’s neighbor. The efforts of faith communities to make this a reality in Massachusetts were efforts of proleptic anticipation, and they changed the course of the health care debate in the U.S.

Now, it is true that there are critics who regard Massachusetts’ health care experiment as a failure. It is, after all, not a true, single-payer universal health care system, but a compromise that keeps the existing players in the game. It still links the basic structure of health care to employment, and some low-income residents who were previously eligible for free care now face co-payments they can ill afford. The critics are right, but the work of proleptic anticipation is never all-seeing and its results always incomplete. Consider John himself, who was thrown in prison and ultimately killed by Herod. Prior to his death, he sent two of his disciples to question Jesus: “Are you the one who is to come,” they asked, “or are we to wait for another?” (Luke 7:19). Even John, the proleptic prophet who was anointed by God’s Word in the wilderness, did not know whether Jesus was really the one he had been so boldly proclaiming – and he was willing to admit it! It is the gift of the text to us as readers that we can see what John could not. But we must leap back over Christmas and join him in his own Advent if we are to understand what a precarious business it is to do the work of proleptic anticipation.

God’s redemptive work is still unfinished in this world, and so we find ourselves, like John, in the awkward place of announcing a Gospel that has yet fully to come, that has yet fully to transform the world, a Gospel that we see and understand only in part. Although the Word of God has arrived, it is still arriving, proleptically, ahead of itself, fragile like a newborn baby. What are you anticipating this Advent season, with its tangled up threads of past, present, and future? Are you anticipating the past, the birth of a baby two thousand years ago that led to a new understanding of the meaning of God’s covenant with Israel, a birth that threatened an empire and changed the course of human history? Are you anticipating the present, the God of our own time who is being born yet again into our world, bringing new life to old stories, blessing and up-ending our lives, who is even now bringing down the proud and lifting up the lowly in ways that we do not see? Or are you anticipating the future, a God who goes ahead of us and calls us into a future, about which we know little but that it will almost certainly not be like the present? Whatever you are anticipating, let yourself be set into motion by the proleptic power of God, who is about to be born into a manger two thousand years ago, on Christmas Day in the morning.

May all the bells on earth soon ring. May our lives echo the Word of God, yet to be fully spoken. May we anticipate the coming of the Christ child. Amen.