

Celebrating Abundance

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Celebrating Abundance

Devotions for Advent

Walter Brueggemann

Compiled by Richard Floyd

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Compiler's Note

Advent is a time for telling the truth—the truth of our weariness and our anxiety, yes, but also the truth of the relentless generosity of God, which opens up futures that seem to be shut down. Walter Brueggemann is a persistent truth-teller, and his sermons invite us to consider the newness and abundance of God that is always already breaking into our settled lives.

If Advent is also a time for waking up, consider Walter an indefatigable alarm clock.

In the prayers that follow each entry, I have tried to draw on Walter's own language and imagery. May they be an occasion to enter more deeply into the text and the season of Advent.

Richard Floyd

Week One

Newness Is on Its Way

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

—Luke 3:15–16

John the Baptizer bursts upon the Gospel of Luke. That is because it is Advent time. And whenever it is Advent time, we get John. It is not yet time for Jesus. This is still the time for getting ready. Getting ready time is not mainly about busy activity, entertaining, and fatigue. Getting ready time is mainly abrasive . . . asking, thinking, pondering, and redeciding.

"He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (v. 16). Now I imagine that sounds as weird to you as it does to me. We who are relatively affluent and relatively sophisticated do not talk that way and do not welcome it. In truth, however, being baptized with God's holy spirit does not mean charismatic acting out. It means, I take it, we may be visited by a spirit of openness, generosity, energy, that "the force" may come over us, carry us to do obedient things we have not yet done, kingdom things we did not think we had in us, neighbor things from which we cringe. The whole tenor of Advent is that God may

act in us, through us, beyond us, more than we imagined, because newness is on its way among us.

John is not the newness. He prepares us for the newness. And his word is that if we want to be immersed in the life-giving power of God, then we must *do* as John says: Share your coat and shoes and goods . . . Manage money in neighborly ways . . . Quit being the heavy in social transactions.

Who would have thought such concrete acts are the tactic whereby God's newness will yet come! Advent is not the kind of "preparation" that involves shopping and parties and cards. Such illusions of abundance disguise the true cravings of our weary souls. Advent is preparation for the demands of newness that will break the tired patterns of fear in our lives.

It is no wonder that in the very next verses of Luke 3, King Herod arrested John, imprisoned him, and tried to silence him. For what John says was dangerous for business as usual. Herod and his company preferred to imagine that their established credentials were enough, with Abraham as their father. And anyway, they did not want newness, so they tried to stop the dangerous newness before it ever intruded into their lives.

What we know, that Herod didn't know and never even suspected, is that John's Advent invitation cannot be silenced or arrested. It continues to invite. And sometimes we let it come among us and transform us.

Living God, visit us in this season with your Holy Spirit that we may get carried away to do obedient things we have not yet done, kingdom things we did not think we had in us, neighbor things from which we cringe. May you act in us, through us, beyond us, more than we imagine, because newness is on its way among us. Amen.

Outrageous God

For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
and its people as a delight.
I will rejoice in Jerusalem,
and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard
in it,
or the cry of distress.

—Isaiah 65:17–19

I invite you to entertain for a moment this poem and let it seep into your bones, and into your heart, and into your vision. God speaks: “New heaven, new earth, new Jerusalem.” It will be a world of rejoicing when the newness comes. And you know why?

Heaven and earth will rejoice because in that new world wrought by God, there will be no more the sound of weeping, no more homeless folks to moan, no more broken folk to whimper, no more terrorized folk to cry out.

Heaven and earth will rejoice, because in that new world wrought by God there will be no more infant mortality, no more infants who live but a few days, and no

more old people who will die too young or live too feebly or continue as a shell while the life is gone.

Heaven and earth will rejoice, because in that new world wrought by God there will be no more usurpation of peoples' homes. Those who build will stay around to inhabit, those who plant will survive to harvest and enjoy their produce. No more people being taxed out of their homes, no more losing their vulnerable homes to the right of eminent domain, no more rapacious seizure by war. When the newness comes, every person will live safely under a vine and fig tree, safe, unafraid, at peace, with no more destructive threats or competitive anxieties.

Heaven and earth will rejoice, because in that new world wrought by God, God will be attentive. God will be like a mother who hears and answers in the night, knowing before we call who is needed and what is needed. And we shall never be left alone again.

The poem is outrageous. The new world of God is beyond our capacity and even beyond our imagination. It does not seem possible. In our fatigue, our self-sufficiency, and our cynicism, we deeply believe that such promises could not happen here. Such newness is only poetic fantasy.

In Advent, however, we receive the power of God that lies beyond us. This power is the antidote to our fatigue and cynicism. It is the gospel resolution to our spent self-sufficiency, when we are at the edge of our coping. It is the good news that will overmatch our cynicism that imagines there is no new thing that can enter our world.

*Outrageous God, outflank our weary Christmas
with the Advent miracle of a power that lies
beyond us. May we receive this power, this new
vision, which would set us free to live boldly into
your dream for the world. Amen.*

Celebrating the New Abundance

And all ate and were filled; and they took up
twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish.
—Mark 6:42–43

In the Gospel of Mark, in chapter 6, Jesus does one of his most impressive miracles, that is, a transformative event to exhibit the saving power of God that is present in and through his life. It is the narrative of feeding the five thousand people. Mark tells us that Jesus had gone with his disciples apart to pray, but huge crowds followed him. Jesus saw the crowds and reacted in kindness to them. He saw their need, and he was moved by compassion for them. He wanted to make their life better. First he taught them the good news of God's generous love. And then he fed them . . . all five thousand of them.

The disciples didn't understand, of course, and thought he couldn't feed such a big crowd. So he took the five loaves and the two fish . . . that is one man's lunch. He took what was there, but then he acted on what was there in his lordly, compassionate, generous way. He turns ordinary food into a sacramental sign of God's massive goodness and generosity. Mark reports:

Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people.
(Mark 6:41)

The words sound familiar, do they not? His prayer consists in the four big verbs of Holy Communion: “He took, he blessed, he broke, he gave.” Jesus takes the ordinary stuff of life in all its scarcity—two fish and five loaves—and transforms them into God’s self-giving generosity. The outcome was that “all ate and were filled” (v. 42). But that is not all: there were twelve baskets left over, enough bread for all the tribes of Israel.

The church—the disciples—are always a little slow, unwilling to learn what the new data of Jesus means, unwilling to recognize that the world is changed by Jesus, unable to act differently in the new world of Jesus. The disciples seem often to act as though Jesus did not really matter; they act as though the world were still bound in scarcity and anxiety and fearfulness and hoarding.

But let me tell you the news that is proclaimed in Christ’s coming, about which we are reminded at every Communion service: Jesus has turned the world into abundance. God is the gift who keeps on giving, and the people around Jesus are empowered to receive abundance and therefore to act generously.

Every day, all day: it’s still true! “He takes, he blesses, he breaks, he gives.” And we are astonished about the surplus. It is all there for those with eyes to see, with ears to hear, and with hearts to remember. We are recipients of enough and enough and more than enough, enough and enough and more than enough to share. And to be glad in this Giver who keeps on giving . . . endlessly.

God whose giving knows no end, make us glad recipients of your generosity. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts to remember your abundance, that we might share it with the world. Amen.

The Vicious Cycle Broken

He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

—Isaiah 2:4

It is written in Deuteronomy that the poor will always be with you (Deut. 15:11). It is written elsewhere that there will always be wars and rumors of wars. It is written in the American psyche that the big ones will always eat the little ones. It is written in the hearts of many hurting ones that their situation will always be abusive and exploitative. It is written and it is believed and it is lived, that the world is a hostile, destructive place. You must be on guard and maintain whatever advantage you can. It is written and recited like a mantra, world without end.

In the middle of that hopelessness, Advent issues a vision of another day, written by the poet, given to Israel midst the deathly cadence. We do not know when, but we know for sure. The poet knows for sure that this dying and killing is not forever, because another word has been spoken. Another decision has been made. A word has been given that shatters our conventions, which bursts open the prospect for life in a world of death. The poem lingers with dangerous power, even for us, even now.

Watch that vision, because it ends in a dramatic moment of transformation. The old city is full of blacksmiths who have so much work to do. Listen and you can hear the hammer on the anvil. The smiths are beating and pounding iron, reshaping it, beating swords into plowshares and spears into tools for orchards. They are decontaminating bombs and defusing the great weapons systems. The fear is dissipating. The hate is collapsing. The anxiety is lessening. The buildup of competitive threat is being reversed. The nations are returning to their proper vocation—care of the earth, love of creation, bounty for neighbor, enough for all, with newness, deep joy, hard work, all because the vicious cycles are ended and life becomes possible.

This vision sounds impossible. It sounded impossible the first time it was uttered; it has not become more realistic in the meantime. Advent, nonetheless, is a time for a new reality. It is not the poem but the old power arrangements of deathliness that are unrealistic. They are unrealistic among the nations and in our communities and churches and families. There is a new possibility now among us, rooted in God's love and God's suffering power. Power from God's love breaks the vicious cycles. We have seen them broken in Jesus, and occasionally we have seen them broken in our own lives. It is promised that the cycles can be broken, disarmament will happen, and life can be different. It is promised and it is coming, in God's good time.

God of love and suffering power, speak again your word of transformation in the midst of our weary world. We so easily capitulate to despair, to numb acceptance of deathly orders. Break the vicious cycles, and kindle in us once again a passion for the possible. Amen.

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