

Sunday, December 5, 2010: Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

by [D. Brent Laytham](#) in the [November 30, 2010](#) issue

On this second Sunday of Advent, perhaps the paraments should be red rather than blue or purple. Red has become our Holy Spirit hue, the liturgical color that accompanies occasions of heightened concentration on pneumatological presence and power. Hanging red isn't like firing a signal flare, as if the Spirit has suddenly been glimpsed after a long absence or concealment. It is more like getting the lighting and camera angle just right in order to see more clearly something that is going on all the time. In Isaiah's vision, the Baptist's harangue and Paul's benediction, it is time for the Holy Spirit to arrive.

Frankly, I was caught flat-footed this year. Advent always feels like the Spirit is on holiday, resting up for the baptism of the Lord. Advent's energy has largely been the tense relation between the God who promises to come and the Promise who comes as God-with-us. What is unnamed and unnoticed in that relation of promise and fulfillment, and in our Advent worship and hymnody, is the timely working of the Holy Spirit.

Yet here in these passages there are promises of the Spirit's arrival into the midst of our violence, division and sin. The Spirit resting on Jesse's shoot portends that the whole earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord (Isaiah); the Spirit given to Christ's church will inspire Jews and gentiles to sing joyful praises to God's name (Romans); the Spirit with which Messiah baptizes will convert Israel to God (Matthew). Don't miss the trinitarian logic of hope here: the Holy Spirit draws Christ (and his people and his creation) to the Father.

Each lesson is anchored to a temporal marker: "On that day," "in former days" and "in those days." More important, these lessons are rife with indicators of temporality—future tense in Isaiah, subjunctive hope in Romans, immanent arrival in Matthew. Time matters in Advent not merely because this season faces the future, but because time is so profoundly implicated in our violence, our divisions, our sin. How often does urgency—that "no time for patience" mentality—trigger our violence? How often does legacy—"it's too late for reconciliation"—sustain our divisions? How often does obduracy—"time won't change anything"—inure us to sin?

Advent's patient longing is for time, but not for "more time" in the way I tell people I could use an extra hour in my days. Christian hope knows that more of this meantime would improve nothing. All the time in the world cannot bring God's peaceable kingdom. Endless time doesn't heal all wounds of alienation. Quantitatively more time cannot make us whole.

We need time that is qualitatively new, the fresh wind of God's future enlivening our present. Advent hopes in the Spirit's power to bring us time freed from urgency and concomitant resorts to violence; time delivered from divisive legacies, because fidelity faces the risen one who is coming; time imbued with possibilities of repentance, prospects for transformation, promise of wholeness. No wonder we sing "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" as we long for time that is perfected by the Holy Spirit.

Lacking the imaginative eloquence of Isaiah or the picturesque fire of John, Romans 15 is probably the least preached of these lessons. Its Advent status appears to hang on the theme of hope and the peripheral reference to Jesse's root. But what the eye fails to notice the ear can hear: joyful singing, a central practice of the Spirit's giving and perfecting time.

Note the musicality of this reading: "live in harmony," "with one voice glorify . . . God," "sing praises," "rejoice," "praise." Here, musical doxology is an image of conforming to the pattern of Christ Jesus, and of the future in which we hope. Singing is an especially powerful spiritual practice because of two metaphoric valences. Note the correlation between the pulmonary and the pneumatic: one cannot sing well without powerful breath, nor can one sing God's glory without the Christ-breathed power of the Spirit. Note also the correlation between harmony and holiness. As diverse voices turn to song and tune to one another, they bring forth one harmonious sound. Likewise, as by the Spirit's power diverse selves are turned toward God and tuned in love, they become Christ's harmonious body.

Thus the Christian practice of singing is a Spirit-empowered participation in Christ's glorification of the Father. Notice how song embodies the qualitative difference of Spirit time. When we sing, time changes from the sequential progression of tick-tock to the complex layerings of meter, beat, rhythm and movement. Experientially we are not enduring the song's duration but participating in its anticipation of glory.

Musically, there is an opening of temporality in every song. In many senses, music begins with what is given: a finite number of keys, chords and meters; particular instruments, voices or sounds; styles and genre. Nevertheless, every song begins with an openness to the future, for the song lies in the future until we sing it. Music arrives from the future, as this new singing becomes "our now." Music is the gift of time freed within the conditioning particulars of acoustical possibilities, musical traditions and human capacities.

Christian singing harmonizes and hopes in conformity with Christ—and joyfully receives the gift of time, the "not yet" becoming our "already," the future freeing our present. What all song does, Advent singing does more of: it fills us with joy that we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.