

Sunday, December 12, 2010

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



Andrei Rublev, ca 1410.

There is an ongoing debate about the angels in Andrei Rublev's icon of the Trinity, painted around 1410, and about which one represents the Son and which the Holy Spirit. For the Word become flesh, my money is on the one wearing blue and brown, for those hues suggest one who comes from heaven to earth to reconcile both in his one person.

In this Sunday's texts, brown abounds. Blessings flow "far as the curse is found." No topography is too remote (wilderness, dry land, desert, streams, sand, pool, swamp, earth), and no location is beyond Christ's reach (Lebanon, Carmel, Israel, highway, prison, palace). These Advent lessons "earth" our Christology in the soil of particular places.

Perhaps James isn't much interested in real farms, but only in the farmer as an analog for patient discipleship. Perhaps Matthew's specificity about John in prison is just good storytelling. Mary's Magnificat seems less interested in any place per se than in sending the rich away empty.

Yet these Advent readings promise more than a blossoming of horticultural metaphors and a burgeoning of geographical images. Isaiah is promising a redeeming of all creation. The Coming One took flesh, which means took earth, so that souls and soil might be redeemed together. Christ doesn't deliver us from brown to blue, for such an extraction from humus to heaven would extract from us our very humanity. Because we are soil as well as soul, true redemption reconciles the two in the midst of creation's healing (think Romans 8:19–21).

Nothing speaks to that quite as clearly as Isaiah naming the highway "Holy Way." Let's interpret this title along the same lines as we do "Israel" in the Magnificat. When Mary sings that the Lord "has helped his servant Israel," does she mean Yahweh's assistance to the patriarch Jacob, God's benevolence to the covenant people, or perhaps even God's restoration of the promised land? Why choose only one? Mary's doxology means that God raises the Israelite servant Jesus in such a way that people and land, you and I, heaven and earth, are healed.

Similarly, Isaiah's promise of "the Holy Way" names Jesus of Nazareth, who is the Father's way to us and the world and all creation's way to the Father (John 14:6). In Jesus, brown and blue unite without confusion or change, as Chalcedon puts it. These terms remind us that the incarnation is not a way for brown to become blue, for human nature to be dissolved in divinity, nor for human spirits to jettison human bodies. The Way that Isaiah and John the Baptist announce changes nothing about the goodness of human nature, or nature itself.

Let's follow a brief gospel geography of this Holy Way. According to Matthew, the Way goes from Mary's womb to Bethlehem's house to Egypt's haven to Jordan's bank to Judea's wilderness to Galilee's synagogues and shores to Jerusalem's temple

to Gethsemane's garden to Caiaphas's house to Pilate's palace to the governor's headquarters to Golgotha's cross to Joseph's tomb to risen life—from Galilee to all nations and times. This Way changes everything "in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:18) for humans and humus alike. Irenaeus of Lyon said that Jesus redeems us by living faithfully our whole human life, from conception to old age. The third Sunday of Advent suggests that our hope for a way toward healing is secured by the Jesus who journeyed healingly through the topography of decay and the geography of sin. Through this Holy Way, reversal brings flourishing: the wilderness is glad, the desert blossoms, futility becomes fertility. On and in this Holy Way, sighing and groaning become "joy and singing"—for humus and humans alike.

Advent is not our cry to trade brown for blue. And it is not just our longing that God will make a way from blue heaven to our brown earth, in all of its ecological and social brokenness. Advent is, instead, our sighs for healing joined with the inchoate groans of creation: "heal me," "heal us," "heal the nations," "heal your world." "Make a way that is our hope, our help, our healing." The geographical gospel is that God already has. God made a Holy Way in Jesus.

Which brings us back to Rublev's icon. Between the three figures is a dish of food. This token of a desert feast is a promissory sign of a glad wilderness, a blossoming and rejoicing desert. It portends that "waters shall break forth in the wilderness," that Sarah's water will break and the child of promise will be born. If Sarah laughed at God's promise, earth and heaven laughed at Isaac's birth, at the promissory sign of a healed creation and at blue and brown reconciled in Christ. Advent is a proper time to set the eucharistic table with promissory signs that Christ has come, is risen and comes again.