

Advent 2 2013

Marcus Borg's take on Advent

I begin with the obvious: Advent is a season of preparing for the coming of Jesus. For many centuries in Western liturgical churches, it has (like Lent) been a penitential season. Though it is about remembering his first coming 2000 years ago, it has also been about his second coming at the last judgment and the need for us to be prepared through earnest repentance. Thus, like Lent, the liturgical colors for Advent have been (and for the most part still are) violet or purple, the color of penitence. Recently, in some churches, the liturgical color of Advent has become blue, reflecting a change in emphasis.

Seeing Advent as a penitential season strikes me as unfortunate. It is the product of a seriously distorted and yet widespread understanding of Christianity: namely, that the central issue in our lives with God is our sinfulness (commonly understood as disobedience and/or failing to measure up to what God requires from us) and thus our need for repentance and forgiveness. Within this framework, that's the reason Jesus was born. As the divinely conceived Son of God, he was sent by God to be the perfect sacrifice, the payment for our sins, so that we can be forgiven. Provided, of course, that we believe in him. That is a serious impoverishment of Christianity and Advent. Christianity and Advent are about so much more. The central themes of the stories of Jesus' birth (about which I will say more in my blogs about Advent in the next few weeks) are hardly at all about sin and our need for forgiveness.

Rather, they and the texts from the Old Testament that they echo are about a much more robust, attractive, and compelling vision of what Christianity, Advent and Christmas are about. Their themes, which will be explored more fully in future blogs, include:

- Liberation from bondage – from the Pharaohs and Herods and Caesars who dominate us and the world. These include oppressive political and economic systems and also psychological-spiritual agents of oppression.
- Return from exile – from life in Babylon. As a biblical metaphor, Babylon has political and economic meanings as well as psychological- spiritual meanings. The latter refer to the separation and estrangement that most often mark our lives. "Estrangement" is an especially resonant word: it means to be separated from that to which we belong. Return from exile is about re-connection to that from which we have become estranged.
- Light in the darkness – the stories of Jesus' birth are full of light imagery. In Matthew, the star in the night sky that leads the wise men to Jesus; in Luke, angels singing to shepherds in the middle of the night. Like liberation from bondage and return from exile, light in the darkness is an archetypal image of human yearning. It is no accident that when Christians in the fourth century formally decided on the date of Jesus' birth, they chose the winter solstice: the time when light begins to vanquish the darkness.
- Yearning and fulfillment –not so much a separate theme, but built into the previous themes. We yearn for liberation from bondage in Egypt, for return from exile in Babylon, for the coming of the light. But it deserves to be named as a major theme because of the way that the birth stories (and the gospels and the New Testament as a whole) emphasize that what happened in Jesus is the fulfillment of our deepest longings.

Advent should be about all of this. It is a season of anticipation, yearning and longing for a different kind of life and a different kind of world. To reduce it to a penitential season of preparing for the second coming of Jesus, or a season of remembering that Jesus was born so that he could pay for our sins, is a tragic travesty of Advent, Christmas, and Christianity.