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## From Cycle B to Cycle C: Preaching Seasonal Elisions

A drop in the temperature, the browning of the landscape and receding sunlight are—for those who live in the Northern hemisphere—sure signs that the season is changing. Winter will soon be upon us. This is not, however, the only seasonal change afoot these days. Gospels about the second coming, readings that feature prophetic predictions of doom or delivery and, ultimately, the Solemnity of Christ the King all signal that the liturgical season is also changing. Even before the onset of winter, Advent will soon be upon us.

This move from Ordinary Time to Advent is not only one more change in liturgical season that marks the unfolding of the church year. It is also a change in the lectionary cycle. We are about to put Mark aside for another twenty-four months, and plunge into Luke. For the preacher, this means adjusting from the largely Jewish world of the proto-evangelist to the Gentile milieu of Luke. It means turning from a gospel that progresses from Galilee to Jerusalem—all the while focused on the central message of the kingdom of God—to what some contend is the most literate of the Gospels, elegantly linking tradition and sources for its mainly Gentile readership.

The effective preacher needs to be attentive in moving from one cycle to another and, in particular, must reckon with the change in the Gospel which anchors that cycle. At the same time, however, it is useful to recognize the elisions which occur between the ending of one lectionary cycle and the beginning of another. The Gospel of Mark does not simply break off at the Solemnity of Christ the King with Luke abruptly taking over the following week. Rather, the Lectionary—structured so very differently than the Bible—builds a bridge between these Gospels and the lectionary cycles fashioned around them. Such bridges not only exist between the end of Ordinary Time and the onset of Advent, but between most of the major seasons of the liturgical year. Thus, respecting the elision between the end of Ordinary Time and the onset of Advent is a useful rehearsal for similar transitions that await us throughout the rest of Cycle C. Furthermore, such seasonal elisions reveal something fundamental about the liturgical year, and the preaching which should punctuate this cycle of grace.

As most preachers recognize, the season of Advent is not simply an extended preparation for annually recalling Christ's birth. Rather, it is

that moment in the church year when we seriously contemplate gospel living between Christ's appearance in history and his return at the end of time. A strong future orientation of Advent may be best mirrored in the preface prescribed for use from the First Sunday of Advent until December 16. In part it reads, "Now we watch for the day, hoping that the salvation promised us will be ours, when Christ our Lord will come again in his glory." It is this future thematic which provides the bridge between Ordinary Time and Advent.

Some preachers have developed the useful habit of reading ahead through the Lectionary in order to acquire an overview of a season. To explore the elision between cycle B and cycle C, however, it is helpful to do the opposite, i.e., begin at the obvious break in the lectionary cycle and read backwards from the Solemnity of Christ the King (November 26). The appearance of a Johannine gospel for this last Sunday of cycle B may surprise some preachers who might have been anticipating a last proclamation from Mark. As pointed out in the last preaching column, however, the evangelist John is a familiar guest throughout cycle B, occasionally supplementing the relatively brief Markan Gospel. This final guest appearance of John relates the dialogue between Pilate and Jesus, excerpted from John's passion narrative. This rich text not only supplies "king" imagery for this so-named Sunday, but more importantly couches that title in a broader discourse about the essential otherworldliness of Jesus' reign, in the midst of a death narrative. The eschatological emphasis in the gospel is highlighted in the first reading by the apocalyptic vision from the Prophet Daniel and a second reading from Revelation which proclaims Jesus as the one who is and who is to come.

While seasoned homilists might expect this focus on Christ's second coming for the Solemnity of Christ the King, they might be surprised how far back into Ordinary Time this thematic stretches. The Thirty-third Sunday of the Year (November 19) expands this accent, first with its alternate opening prayer which announces God's promise of salvation through the future coming of Jesus. This emphasis parallels the Markan vision of the second coming of Christ (13:24-32) in that day's gospel, and a closing apocalyptic vision from Daniel (12:13) in the first reading. In the second reading there is also a final proclamation from Hebrews, the New Testament letter we began reading on the Twenty-seventh Sunday of the Year (October 8). It is especially the middle section of Hebrews (5:11-10:39) on the eternal priesthood and eternal sacrifice of Christ which resonates with this "end-time" thematic. Finally, selected verses from Psalm 16 further bolster this emphasis.

On the Thirty-second Sunday of the Year (November 12) it is the reading from Hebrews which explicitly acknowledges Christ's second coming, proclaiming that "he will appear a second time . . . to bring

salvation to those who eagerly await him." Psalm 146 lends some support to this future orientation with its final acclamation, "The Lord shall reign forever; your God, O Zion, through all generations."

Through this eschatological prism, it is even possible to find resonance in the texts provided for the Thirty-first Sunday of the Year (November 5). Again it is the proclamation from Hebrews which draws attention to this seasonal thematic through its announcement of the eternal priesthood of Jesus. The opening prayer this day also announces our trust in God's promise of eternal life. Just a few days earlier we celebrate the Feasts of All Saints (November 1) and All Souls (November 2): feasts shot through with eschatological imagery and prayers for final deliverance, stretching this end-time thematic to the very beginning of November.

Reading backwards through the last Sundays of the church year, it becomes clear that the seasonal change from Ordinary Time to Advent is incremental. This assessment, based on the prescribed texts for this period, could be even stronger depending upon the optional prayer texts chosen through November. The sixth preface for Sundays in Ordinary Time (P 34), for example, announces thanksgiving for the gift of the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead and provides a "foretaste and promise of the paschal feast of heaven." Innumerable song and hymn texts could further amplify this seasonal strand.

The point to this "backward-reading" exercise is not simply to discover how deep eschatological themes reach back into Ordinary Time or to learn something about the move from one lectionary cycle to another. Rather, it illustrates a pattern that holds true for virtually every other season of the liturgical year: transitions are ordinarily both gradual and permeable. The rites and texts that provide the transition from Advent to Christmas, for example, suggest as much continuity as discontinuity in their unfolding of the mystery of the incarnation. Similarly, a manifestation pattern continues after the first of the year as Christmas gives way to Ordinary Time and lectionary texts announce the call of the first disciples, the baptism of Jesus or the first miracle. The transitions from Ordinary Time to Lent and Easter back to Ordinary Time are somewhat more abrupt since the moveable date of Easter arbitrarily inserts this seasonal cycle at various points in the Lectionary. The move from Lent to Triduum and Triduum to Easter, however, provides many often unexplored connections. In particular, the multiple resurrection appearance stories during the great fifty days continue reconciliation themes sounded during Lent.

Discovering this pattern of elisions from season to season, while useful in its own right, is also significant for the deeper theological insight it provides about the liturgical year. Learning that liturgical seasons are not hermetically sealed reminds the preacher that the liturgical year is

essentially permeable. It is more metaphor than road map, more poetry than prescription. The mysteries highlighted throughout the various seasons of the liturgical year cannot be confined to those seasons. Succumbing to a more literal approach to the church year, however, we often restrict preaching about the cross to Lent, preaching about incarnation to Christmas, and preaching about resurrection during Easter. This does not deny the fact that there are overarching thematics that mark the various seasons of the liturgical year. These master images or central mysteries, however, should not be reduced to temporally bound formula, such as “advent = eschatology.”

Ironically, the more we confine certain thematics to particular seasons of the year, the more likely it is that our preaching about them in any season will be limited in its effectiveness. The basic mysteries of the Christian faith—like the belief that we are living between the coming of Christ in history and the coming of Christ in glory—need to be rehearsed constantly through the whole of the liturgical year. Happily, the seasonal move from Ordinary Time to Advent serves as an annual reminder of one of those central mysteries that must be preached all year long.

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