

The Rev. Dr. Eric O. Springsted
Georgetown Presbyterian Church, Washington, DC
November 22, 2009

The Weight of the Past

Text: Hebrews 12:1-13

For several years, I have explained to congregations that during the season of Advent we put ourselves in the position of the Old Testament prophets who looked forward to the coming of the messiah. It's a pretty good explanation, and it covers a lot of bases. Indeed, during this four weeks before Christmas, we read from the prophets as they look forward to a great future hope. By imaginatively putting ourselves in their sandals, we in the darkest month of the year can get a lively sense of the hope they proclaimed. For this reason, in an increasingly impatient culture where Christmas advertising began several weeks ago, we can also make a certain psychological use of Advent so that we are not tired of Christmas sometime before the morning of the twenty-fifth, with the tree out the door and on the curb the next day. In this way, we can use Advent to develop the very important theological virtues of patience and waiting which are crucial to having hope.

However, it has dawned on me in recent years that there is a lot more to Advent than this re-enactment designed to prepare us for Christmas allows. It can be, indeed, psychologically helpful, and it can be spiritually fruitful *if* it causes us to look forward, waiting for redemption, or if it teaches us something about patience. However, repeated acts of self-willed imagination like this lose steam over time. They do so in this case, just as they do in the attempt to imagine oneself at the Last Supper as a way of taking communion meaningfully. Both wear thin with repetition, probably because all their energy comes from within us, and we have limited resources. They are a way of pretending, and we can't give ourselves the gift of God's presence

by pretending. So, although such acts of imagining the past can be helpful, they don't always engage us in our present problems. The fact of the matter is that liturgical seasons, like sacraments, aren't just historical re-enactments, anyhow. They deal with past facts, present presences and absences, and with future hopes; they don't just deal with the hopes that others once had, and that we now simply try to imagine for ourselves.

The problem is here: the prophets do have a great deal to say about hope and waiting, and their message is eternal. It can and should be applied to our situation. But we always have to realize that still there is a crucial difference between us and them historically. They were waiting for Christ to come; for us, Christ has already come, and whatever we are waiting for, it isn't his birth. That has already happened, and therefore whatever hope we have is based on the fact that it has happened. Whatever waiting we need to do, and I suspect that there is a lot of left to be done, has to be a waiting that understands Christ has come and that Christ has been born. *Our* waiting is because he has been born, and the way we wait has to do with the fact that he has been born and has already claimed us as his own. Our present reality is that Christ's birth, and his death, and his resurrection have changed things for us. What we are now waiting for is to greet him face to face and to gaze on the face of God forever. Nothing else can fulfill the hope that he once incited in us, and there is nothing ambiguous about it. We therefore still need to have patience. But it is not the patience of those who don't know what they are waiting for. It is the patience that is actually the virtue of perseverance, the perseverance of finishing the journey that Christ himself set us on so long ago. In many ways, that is a lot harder to do.

All this was brought home to me last month, when the Monday night Bible study was reading the *Letter to the Hebrews*. What I have just described was exactly the situation of the church that had received that letter. Jewish by birth and practice, they had embraced in Christ the

new covenant that Jeremiah had once promised, and they, like us, were now waiting for its final fulfillment. But things had apparently gotten tough, maybe even *because* they had embraced the messiah's birth and death. It doesn't seem to be the case that they were being actively persecuted, at least not to the point of their blood being shed. But they were flagging, they were tired. They weren't coming to church as the letter makes clear when it warns them that they are not "to neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some." What is also clear is that they were trying to retreat from the claims that God had made on them when they embraced Christ as their brother and God's messiah. They were trying, it appears, to go back and to recapture a golden day, an easier day when things were better. They were trying to retreat into the past, they were trying, as it were, to wait for the messiah as if the messiah had not yet been born, as if it had not all happened. But it had happened.

It is in this situation that the author of this letter, which is really a sermon and not a letter, exhorts them to persevere, to run "with perseverance the race that is set before us." They who had embraced Christ couldn't go back and wait for him to be born. Instead, what was now needed was something forward looking: "to look to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross...and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God." If they could persevere, and follow that example, that pioneer of their faith, and if they, like him, endured, then his joy would be theirs, too. But they had to look forward, not back.

So I think you will understand what I mean when I say that there is no better expression than this letter of what the season of Advent is about for those who wait because Christ has been born. And because there is no better expression of what Advent means, this letter also has the right sort of advice for those of us who also wait in churches two thousand years later.

So, let us simply consider today one bit of advice that the letter offers. In coming weeks, we will consider other advice that it gives. Now, the bit I am interested in today comes near the end of the letter but it is actually a crucial first step to overcoming their weariness, and to their looking ahead with hope and with joy. It is the simple advice “lay aside every weight.” What sort of weight? Well, from everything else that is said in the letter, one of the greatest weights that has unduly burdened them is their past. Because of their past, they simply cannot move forward.

Let us understand what is going on here. There are those who think that the past, any kind of past, is dead weight, and that change, any kind of change, is a good thing. Such people often couple this disdain for the past with a rosy and unshakeable belief in inevitable progress. Einstein is better than Newton, and Newton is better than Aristotle, and we all know more than Aristotle because we are contemporaries of Einstein, and our science will find a solution to everything in time, with enough research dollars. Inevitable intellectual evolution is being espoused here, wherein the past is thought of as a series of muddled attempts to grapple with life, and the future an inevitable solution. I am not, and never have been somebody who believes such a thing. I actually still think that Plato was right, and that the rest of history is, as Whitehead once said, footnotes to Plato, some better, some worse, but none as good as the original.

The fact of the matter is that the past is an important thing, and a vital thing for the life of a community. Communities, good communities, should be rooted communities. Good communities grow organically out of a past inspiration, and their history is the history of that original inspiration playing itself out in life. For that reason, the past therefore often holds the treasures that communities need to march into the future. This is especially true of religious communities. Judaism grew and flourished when it balanced its life around the Law that God had

given to Moses. When they forgot the Law, they perished. When they remembered and reorganized their life around the covenant, they flourished, and they even anticipated what God had in mind to fulfill his promises to them. In Christianity, the mighty force unleashed in the Reformation was a recovery of the ancient church, not the invention of a new one. One of the mottoes of the Reformation was the Latin tag: *ad fontes!* Back to the sources! Back to the fountains from which living water pours! To move forward, we had to go back and tap the springs of original inspiration. The future of the church the Reformers knew lay in the church's faithfulness to the revelation that had originally been given it.

It was precisely this sort of use of the past that had created the church that received the *Letter to the Hebrews*. Jeremiah had prophesied a new covenant, a fulfillment of God's first promise. In that new covenant, God said, a righteous branch would spring up and he would execute justice and righteousness. This community believed this promise of the past, they believed that it was fulfilled in Christ, and it propelled them into a new life. It created them as a Christian community. Their faithfulness to the original inspiration caused them to hear the word that God spoke to them now. So that sort of past is a good thing, a life giving thing.

But that is not the only sort of past that we have. We also have a past that weighs us down. *This* past is not an inspiration that flows into the future like a spring or fountain. This past is the accumulation of *stuff* and it is all this *stuff* that weighs us down. It is the accumulation of spiritual wax in our ears. Some of this past is decidedly negative, such as remembered anger or resentments, or smugness or narrow mindedness. But some of it may even have once been positive. Let me give you an example.

Little more than a dozen years ago, after having lived in Illinois for sixteen years, we moved back to New Jersey. Our oldest daughter had just graduated from high school, and was

off to college. The other two girls were in high school and middle school respectively. Now, the house we were moving from was a big Victorian, with a large basement, but more importantly, it had a full walk-up attic. Because we had always had such a space, there was not a single drawing from kindergarten or first grade made by any of the three girls that had been thrown away. Nor had anything else that we had accumulated in the last sixteen years, including family treasures from several deceased grandparents and from downsizing moves made by our parents. Now, I can say that for my archaeologist wife that attic provided a vocational heaven. But it was also very clear that we were not going to go anywhere with all that stuff, interesting as it may have been. Only after giving a lot to the church rummage sale, and having a yard sale ourselves where the pricing policy was based on the sheer number of pounds of stuff we could get rid of, did we lighten our load sufficiently that we could move to the new life that we were looking forward to.

It is easy to make light of that situation and laugh about “stuff,” but the fact of the matter is that in going through all that stuff, most of it was in its own right important and represented very happy past days lived over many years. Little was trivial or irrelevant. If we didn’t have to think about moving, we would have kept all of it until the kids could take it away themselves. But we were now faced with moving into the future, and so the choice had to be made between what in the past was essential to who we were and to where we were going, and what was not. This is even more true with negative stuff that we carry around with us such as anger and resentment, and the inability to listen.

The same sort of thing happens with churches. There is a past that is essential to them and there is a past that may well be happy, and that may represent good times – or not, but in any case is not essential to the future, that even keeps them from it. There is a past that lets us hear God’s Word to us, and a past that keeps us from hearing it. I think that something like that had

happened to the Hebrews' congregation. They had embraced in Christ the fulfillment of the prophetic past. That prophetic past was essential to them. But embracing it may well have precipitated other changes in the church. If attendance was down, it may have been because people were not getting along now; they may not have all been on board about the direction of the church. It may well have been because people didn't like the changes that accepting the fulfillment of the prophetic word brought. There would have been a lot. The argument in the congregation certainly seems to have been the result of some strong pressure to return to the way things were done in the past, a return which may even have entailed the denial of Christ, a return to simple prophetic waiting.

But, of course, once fulfillment has come, you can't go back to waiting in the same old way. You have to do it in a new way. You have to take what is essential, and you have to have the courage to persevere. You have to keep moving ahead, not looking in the rear view mirror and wishing you were back there. Pascal once said that in the spiritual life, if you are not moving ahead, you are falling back; there is no static place. You have to listen anew, and you have to lay aside every weight, and you have to tap the real, the original sources of your identity and let them take you into the future. And if you mistake the weighty past for the source that launched you originally in the past, you will fail in the future and the past will still be gone. *That* is the very particular challenge of Advent in the twenty-first century after the birth of our Lord.

That means a lot here in this church. This is a church that is in the midst of transition, and has been there for quite some time now. It is looking into the future. In all likelihood, a new beginning that will shape its next few years will start soon, as it is likely that it will have a new installed pastor. As such this is a church that is very much a church of Advent. This liturgical season's for you, GPC. But because it is such a church, it needs to keep in mind that in order to

move into that future, it has to persevere in the race that has been set before it. And to persevere it has to distinguish the weighty past from the inspirational past. It has to lay aside the weighty past and listen again to the source that launched this as a church of our present and coming Lord, Jesus Christ. The ability to distinguish the two kinds of past, and to lay aside the weight that causes one to falter, will make all the difference between being a church of Jesus Christ, which Christ himself will sustain and move forward with his own presence, or being a church of your own imagining. It will make all the difference between being a church that acts for the sake of the joy that is set before it, or a church where, weighed down by the past, people neglect to meet together.

Friends, in this season and in this year listen to this scripture. Lay aside every weight and the sin that clings, and persevere, and in persevering, look for joy.