First Sunday of Advent, Cycle C

Old St. Pat’s, 2021

Eugene Lowry is a favorite homilist

 especially celebrated for his

somewhat subversive approach to preaching.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Lowry has argued that the problem with most preachers

is that they give away the plot too early in the homily,

akin to Shakespeare walking to the apron of the stage

 before the premiere of *Romeo and Juliet*

and explaining that in this tragedy

 about two star crossed lovers

 both protagonists would eventually commit suicide

 before their broken-hearted families are reconciled.

The remedy, according to Lowry,

 is for the preacher first to problematize the readings

 almost pulling the rug out from under

 the assembly’s established expectations

that they know where readings and homily are headed.

 After what he calls this “oops” move

He advises homilists to let the plot of the preaching unfold

 in all of its surprise and unpredictability.

I’d like to move Lowry’s strategy one step further,

 as we launch into this first Sunday of Advent,

 and problematize not only a single set of readings

 but actually an entire liturgical season

 since, in my opinion, Advent is always a bit of a puzzlement.

It is common for Christians to believe that Advent is the season

that prepares us to celebrate the birth of the Lord.

But how do you prepare for an event that is long past?

What is the sense in a season that primes us for ancient history?

That galvanizes passion for what is completed

without devolving into a season reduced

to historical commemorations or ritualized remembering?

Ironically, one way through this dilemma

 is by recognizing what could be characterized

 as the completely backward design of this season,

 and the inverted logic of Advent

 as explicitly exposed in the readings proclaimed

 over its four Sundays.

 Every one of the 3 cycles of the lectionary

 has the 1st Sunday of Advent opening with a futuristic gospel,

 an apocalyptic vision of Jesus’ second coming

 with not too subtle warnings

 about the distress that lies ahead.

 It is certainly what we get today in Luke.

 But then, in a kind of liturgical time warp

 The second and third Sundays of Advent

 Propel us thousands of years backwards,

 transporting us to the world of John the Baptism

 the adult cousin of Jesus

 as he wrestles with the truth about his younger relative.

 And then the fourth Sunday moves us even earlier

 into salvation history

 and immediate preparations for the Lord’s birth.

 Ironically, this backwards design of the season

 demands a kind of backward thinking

 maybe even backward believing

 in order to savor the center of this season

 and live in the presence of the mysteries it nurtures.

 Or, as Marshall McLuhan once wisely said:

 “We look at the present through a rear-view mirror.

 We march backwards into the future.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

Now it might sound at least counter intuitive

 If not counter productive

 To think or even believe backwards.

 On the other hand, backward planning

 Or what is sometimes called backcasting

 is a proven and highly effective technique

 in business, urban development and even the sciences.

 The basic premise is to start from a desirable future

 And then look back to the present to identify

 The most strategic steps or actions

 Necessary for achieving that goal.[[3]](#endnote-3)

 Actually one of the most famous technological achievements

 Of the 20th century

 - landing astronauts on the moon in 1969 -

 was precisely achieved through backwards planning.

In some ways, today’s gospel gives us an image of

 The perfect future that we long for:

 The coming of Jesus in power and glory

 A power and glory that might bring about God’s reign

 Of justice, tolerance for all, and the disenfranchisement of none.

 Paul’s instruction to the Thessalonians outlines

 Some of the strategic steps we need to take

for the fulfillment of God’s reign:

 overflowing with love for one another

 nurturing strong hearts

 Learning to be blameless … even holy before God.

 Our believing backwards into that future

 Takes us to the end and the goal of Advent

 The mystery of incarnation

 Occurring not only once in history

 But incarnation as the enduring mystery

 Of God’s unending love affair with humanity

 All of humanity.

 This backward reading reveals

 That the ongoing work of incarnation

 Is the fundamental strategy

 For enacting God’s holy reign

 Making way for Christ’s enduring presence in the world.

Reading today’s lectionary texts forward, especially that gospel text

 Can sound scary, threatening, or maybe even prophetic

naming the chaos of the present moment

 with migrants freezing on the border with Poland

 Dancing Grannies killed by some lunatic

in Waukesha’s Christmas parade

 and Christian missionaries still held for ransom in Haiti.

 Is that a fulfilment of Luke’s foreboding

 That the day will close in on us like a trap?

 Or do we have to learn to read these texts

 And even the events of our lives

 And this crazy world

 Backwards first … so we can move forward.

 Backwards into incarnation

 So we can move forward into God’s reign.

There is actually a form of poetry known as “reverse poetry”

 It is poetry that can be read from front to back

 Or from back to front.

 When it is read in the ordinary sequence

 From top to bottom

 It often can sound quite depressing

 Like reading the lectionary

 From Jeremiah to Paul to Luke …

 It sounds promising in the beginning

 Like Jeremiah’s vision of the emergence of God’s justice

 But then it gets a little scary when we hear from Paul

 That we have to be blameless

 In light of the Lord Jesus’ second coming

 Which turns to downright terror

 When Luke walks us to the brink of the eschaton

 The final moments

 Marked by anguish, distress and fright.

But if you read the poem backwards

 Like reading the lectionary texts

 And even the whole of Advent backwards

 A more life-giving and affirming scenario emerges.

Recently a 10-year-old girl student Christ Church school in England

 Wrote a reverse poem about dyslexia[[4]](#endnote-4)

 Even though she herself does not suffer from that challenge.

 As you know, dyslexia is a learning disability

 That inhibits fluent reading

 But also reading comprehension

 Spelling

 Writing

 And even math skills.

When you read her poem, aptly named “Dyslexia,”

 From top to bottom, it paints a disheartening picture of distress:

It reads:

 I am stupid

 Nobody would ever say

 I have a talent for words

 I was meant to be great

 That is wrong

 I am a failure

 Nobody could ever convince me to think that

 I can make it in life.

Sounds pretty depressing … but listen to when happens

 When we read it backwards:

 “I can make it in life

 Nobody could ever convince me to think that

 I am a failure

 That is wrong

 I was meant to be great

 I have a talent for words

 Nobody would ever say

 I am stupid.”

 What a reversal … what an affirmation …

what a resurrection … what a budding poet

what an inspiration to develop a spirituality

that the world might consider dyslexic.

 But that is the task of Advent

working backwards from the promised reign of God

 through the sacred strategy of incarnation

 for birthing that reign of justice and dignity in our own time.

It is a challenging journey, to be sure

 And one that begs for mercy and graces and blessings

 And so we invoke the poet’s blessing as we pray:

It is difficult to see it from here,
I know,
but trust me when I say
this blessing is inscribed
on the horizon.
Is written on
that far point
you can hardly see.
Is etched into
a landscape
whose contours you cannot know
*from here.*All you know
is that it calls you,
draws you,
pulls you toward
what you have perceived
only in pieces,
in fragments that came to you
in dreaming
or in prayer.

I cannot account for how,
as you draw near,
the blessing embedded in the horizon
begins to blossom
upon the soles of your feet,
shimmers in your two hands.
It is one of the mysteries
of the road,
how the blessing
you have traveled toward,
waited for,
ached for
suddenly appears
as if it had been with you
all this time,
as if it simply
needed to know
how far you were willing
to walk
*to find the lines
that were traced upon you
before the day
that you were born*.[[5]](#endnote-5)

1. Eugene Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form,* expanded edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage* (Toronto: Random House, 1967), 75. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. S.E. Bibri, “Backcasting in futures studies: a synthesized scholarly and planning approach to strategic smart sustainable city development,” *European Journal of Futures Research* 6:13 (2018) at <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40309-018-0142-z> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.today.com/parents/10-year-old-s-reverse-poem-about-dyslexia-goes-viral-t149620> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. <http://adventdoor.com/2012/11/25/advent-1-drawing-near/> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)