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)