

## Foreword

Advent season of the church is a season that summons to subversion. By “sub-version” we mean the capacity to tell a version of the world that lives beneath the dominant version, that exposes the dominant version as false, and that commends an alternative telling of the world. The Advent-Christmas memories of the church do indeed subvert as a “sub-version”:

- Luke subverts the poverty-stricken despair of the shepherds.
- Matthew subverts the deterministic knowledge of the wise men.
- Matthew and Luke subvert the absolutism of Herod and Caesar.
- As we quote Isaiah 40:3-5, the poet subverts the hegemon of Babylon.

In order to do the work of sub-version, we must recognize the substance of the dominant version. Of course it consists in white supremacy, male domination, American exceptionalism, predatory debt, the legitimacy of cheap labor (shepherds!), and the technological devouring of creation. Most folk in our congregations (including us!) have signed on uncritically to the dominant version in some way. And now, in this season, the preacher has the hard, wondrous work of subversion that exposes the gospel contradiction of the dominant version and summons us to a version that is, by the norms of the world, quite “sub.”

The material offered in this issue addresses the work of sub-version in various rich and suggestive ways. Katherine Grieb provides a masterful summary of Advent that lives close to the hymnody of the church. Sam Wells ponders the wonder of our fragility and the passion we may have for the end of the story. David Cunningham urges us to the practice and habit of hope that end in action. Theodore Wardlaw considers how we respond to the wonder of God’s love for us in generosity. Valerie Bridgeman focuses on the thin place between this world and the next through All Saints Day as a prelude to Advent.

Will Willimon refutes the “do-goodism” of Judas through extravagance toward Jesus from which all else follows. My piece assures that the music of glad celebration does indeed start again, in God’s good time. Agnes Norfleet shows how faith, in the face of fear, knows that we are “never alone, never forsaken, never absent from divine presence.” Julie Parker traces a most sweeping narrative from the Mafia to the practice of prayer. Joe Harvard offers us a compelling read on how we may learn from a faith-culture other than the dominant white one we take for granted.

What a feast! The preacher has all of these resources plus a summons to sub-version. What is a preacher to do? Well, all of us know that in normal times we are mostly timid and cautious and equivocate. We know that our congregations are not overly attuned to the subversion and cling in various ways to the dominant version. We voice it carefully, hoping folk do not fully grasp its radical implications.

But this, as we all know, is no normal time. Our writers often mention the pandemic. But then, pandemics of fear, hate, and poverty are all around and beneath COVID-19. This is, moreover, a time when many folk wistfully recognize that “We can’t keep on like this” with the dominant narrative. This now is our moment of preaching. *Imagine* hope and relief for the shepherds. *Imagine* differently based

knowledge for the wise men. *Imagine* Herod and Caesar made penultimate. *Imagine* preaching as a moment in which the old failed world is relinquished, a new possibility is opened. *Imagine* that the congregation responds in doxological gratitude for a “sub” that is “fresh from the word.” *Imagine!*

Walter Brueggemann