

Pastoral Care in Preaching: Background for Lent

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Lent is a period of preparation. Lent is preparation for the depth of the passion of Christ—the cross. Lent is preparation for the beginning of the exaltation of Christ—the resurrection.

For some, the period of Lent is seen as a time of meditative discipline. For others it is a time of intellectual preparation. Yet, at its best times historically, the church has seen Lent as preparation of the whole person. For those of us in the Reformation tradition, the study of the Scripture, the looking into the meaning of the Scripture, is surely part of the preparation. Yet preparation must also include the soul, the emotions, the whole person.

Whether it is a Jewish family cleaning out the home before the week of the Passover Seder celebrations or the “giving up something” for Lent or the days of prayer in the meditative silence of the monastery, the preparation has always had about it the discipline of what psychologists today call the “feeling side” of our beings.

As we look at any series of sermons during Lent, therefore, the preacher today does well to keep before him or her this whole person for whom the sermon is given. Any lectionary will have within it a thread that binds the series together. The thread may be geographical, or thematic, or chronological—deal with ministry in a certain location, pull together an underlying idea, or give a certain time sequence. For those who do not use a lectionary, the series may be based on an idea to be developed, a particular book to be studied (such as Ephesians), or a concern such as “prayer.” For those who use neither series nor a lectionary, the very recognition of Lent at all gives a focus of the journey to Jerusalem. Whatever the approach, the preacher must ask, “How does this touch the whole person?”

This article takes as its example a personal choice for Ash Wednesday and the Lectionary, section B, of the Presbyterian Church for Lent. The approach, however, fits any series.

This article also has a specific perspective from which to look at all sermons—including Lent. That perspective is the pastoral care that is in each sermon.

Pastoral care may be defined in different ways by different people. From my vantage point, pastoral care is the perspective that looks at any action in terms of its healing, sustaining, caring quality. Although that definition is suggested by Seward Hiltner in his book *Preface to Pastoral Theology*, it is by no means limited to him.

This definition suggests that when we look at any passage for preaching we look at it from the standpoint of its healing, sustaining, caring qualities and

that when we prepare the sermon itself, we ask, “how is this sermon speaking to the experience of healing, sustaining, caring?”

Unfortunately, these qualities are often seen as present only if they are so labelled in either the service of worship or the sermon. Many do not see healing as present unless the service of worship is advertised as a “healing service.” If the sermon speaks to themes of judgment or the apocalypse, the tendency is to suggest that “care” is absent.

Yet that is precisely what leads to misuse of “healing services” or even heresy around sermons on judgment. There is a healing dimension to that which holds up the judgment of God and prevents us from seeing healing in just magical terms. The judgment of God presented in the context that “God cares” is totally different from the judgment of God presented apart from that context. The one becomes redemptive, the other simply autocratic.

From this perspective, every hour of worship is in some sense a “healing service,” and every hour of worship is in some sense a time of caring, a time of judgment. It was when Peter was most aware of Christ’s concern that he said, “Depart from me O Lord, for I am a sinful man.”

What, then, allows for this dimension of pastoral care in a sermon? For reasons too long to enumerate here, I see this dimension when something unique happens between the preacher and congregation on one side and the Scripture on the other. When the Scripture is so held up that one first hears what is being said to one’s personal condition and then proclaims what one has heard; healing, sustaining, caring are all found.

Note that the dialogue is not between the preacher and the congregation. That is speech-making. In preaching, the dialogue is between the Lord of the Scripture and all of us. The preacher and the congregation have different roles in this sermonic moment, but key is the fact that both must hear the Word and both must proclaim it.

The pastor’s role is to hear the Word and proclaim the Word. That is almost so obvious that we miss the question, “how proclaim?” The goal is to proclaim what the pastor hears in such a way that the congregation enters not into a dialogue with the pastor but a dialogue with the Scripture. The pastoral task is to set up the Scripture so that the congregant may say, “I do not hear it as the preacher does, but with the preacher’s help I hear it saying to me . . .”

The task is then for the preacher, either through the sermon or through the other aspects of the worship hour, to allow for the congregation the opportunity to proclaim. The proclamation may be in the liturgy itself—through a hearty “Amen” or a prayer or a hymn. The proclamation may be in what the congregant does when going out into the world. When a service of worship ends with the congregation charged to go into all the world to live by what has been heard (as distinct from “by what the preacher has said”), the process of the sermon is seen as relating to the whole week.

At this point, it is tempting to move on and speak to how this approach has implications for the whole order of worship—for the benediction, for the period of confession the following week, and so on. Our focus here, however, is on the sermon itself. When both pastor and congregation are seen as together in hearing, there is a sense that “we are not alone.” That sense of the group is

supportive and sustaining. When the congregation hears that which helps with the hearing what is in the Word and how that may be proclaimed, there is the awareness that “someone cares.” When congregation and pastor together hear the healing presence of Christ, the healing touch of Christ is there even if never called such. As the woman with the issue of blood reached out and touched the hem of Christ’s garment, so pastor and congregant can reach out. The preacher guides that that may happen.

Given this background, let us look then at the lectionary for Lent. During these weeks, the goal is not just hearing, but hearing as preparation for the experience of Holy Week. The body of Scripture begins with Ash Wednesday and ends in Palm Sunday—the two high days that frame Lent. There are several threads that may be taken through this series. The one I would lift up in this year’s series is the theme of hope. I would entitle this theme, “The Dynamic of Hope.”

Ash Wednesday

Scripture: Mark 1:9-13 and Matthew 25:1-12

The coming of the bridegroom creates the image of joy, anticipation, and hope. Hence, the theme is established.

Those of us in the American tradition have difficulty feeling the impact of this symbol. For us, the wedding focuses on the bride. The groom and the groom’s family are almost just a necessary presence. In India, by contrast, a Punjabi wedding gives the biblical picture. The groom arrives on horseback. He carries a small child—a symbol of the future and good luck. Lights in the darkness of the evening are carried about him, and as he arrives, the whole area of people is illumined. The bride, the family, and the guests await this time of hope for the future.

We may reject the male chauvinism of the event, and do. Yet we must not miss the impact of the message—hope for the future. In the letter of James, this hope is spelled out as wholeness and healing in Christ. In the prophecy of Isaiah, this hope is seen as not without certain responsibilities. Thus the prophet and the epistle lead to a sense of the dynamic of hope.

What the confrontation will be for pastor and people will depend on the time and the moment. My concern would be that confrontation with the real triumph of Christ in the midst of real temptations would give a sense of hope to all of us in the midst of our real world.

First in Lent

Scripture: Genesis 9:8-15, 1 Peter 3:18-22, Mark 1:12-15

Here, hope is related to the covenant. The question is, “why can I trust God?” The task is to look at the experience of the flood, see its end, and out of it feel the sense of excitement and apprehension for the future. “I am glad it is over, but how will I make it in a world like this” may well be the feelings. Yet the rainbow symbolizes a covenant and a response to the basis for trust at least

of God. The supportive aspect of pastoral care is there. It comes again when Jesus says, "I shall not leave you comfortless" John 14:18. Peter sees the fulfillment of this hope in the experience of baptism that expresses salvation (real healing), and Mark pulls together Jesus' responsible handling of temptation with the support and strength of the angels of God.

Second in Lent

Scripture: Genesis 22:1-2, 9-13; Romans 8:31-39; Mark 9:1-9

In this combination of Scripture, Christ becomes the agency of our hope in God. God provides the means of saving Isaac in the ram caught in the thicket and in the Christ who is transfigured (hence we have a foretaste of the exaltation of Christ). Paul therefore can sing his doxology in the midst of any problem of life—for nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Third in Lent

Scripture: Exodus 20:1-3, 7-8, 12-17; 1 Corinthians 1:22-25; John 4:16-26.

Here we have passages that deal with the dynamic of hope as seen in the specific confrontation between us and God. In Exodus, Moses brings the people to the mountain of God (vs. 17); in John, we see the dialogue with God incarnate (the woman at the well talks with Christ); and in Paul we have the confession that in such dialogue we experience both the power and wisdom of that dialogue.

Here is a perfect example of the preaching task: not only to expound the passages but to allow for confrontation of the passage by both pastor and people. As with Moses, we must bring people to the foot of the presence of God.

In exegesis, note the balance of power and wisdom in 1 Corinthians—the masculine and the feminine principles of creation. Understanding of the wisdom literature is of help here. Paul has brought together the integrating strength of wisdom and the creative judgment (power) of God. As we become aware of these two operating in ourselves, we become strong persons in the midst of a destructive age.

Fourth in Lent

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 36:14-21, Ephesians 2:1-10, John 3:14-21

Since the Gospel reading begins with the symbol of the crucifixion and its relation to Moses lifting up the serpent, one is surprised to find the lectionary sending us to Chronicles rather than the Pentateuch. The reason is seen in Ephesians where it is clear that the ultimate hope is in trusting God's process of salvation, of life, of healing, and not our own. In Chronicles, we have then the contrast between Zedekiah who trusted his own process and Jeremiah who trusted God's. The emphasis in the Gospel then is on God, "who so loved the world that he sent his son" and not on the dynamic of the crucifixion.

Fifth in Lent

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:34, Hebrews 5:1-10, John 12:20-33

Again, one might wonder why, with the passage from Hebrews, we are not referred to Genesis and the story of Melchizedek. The reason? These passages focus not on how we are saved but how we know God—hence the one verse from Jeremiah. We know God when we understand the dynamic of obedience.

Both in the Gospel and the Epistle, the dynamic involves us in the battle between good and evil. In fact, we are the battle field. As Jesus won that battle by perfect obedience—even the cross—we sense how we may become part of the battle by obedience to the process of God.

Palm Sunday

Scripture: Zechariah 9:9-12, Hebrews 12:1-6; Mark 11:1-11

Palm Sunday is seen more as the beginning of Holy Week than the end of Lent. Yet if Lent is a period of preparation, Palm Sunday is—similar to the first Sunday in January—a day of transition from the past to the future. These comments could have ended with the prior paragraph, but as a transition Sunday, I add this thought: here we begin the days that show that the hope was justified. In the suffering of Jesus we see that suffering is not punishment for evil but a process for defeating evil. Here we see the fulfillment of the dynamic of hope.

By approaching all these passages with the goal of holding them up so that the preacher hears, and seeks to allow the congregation to hear, the sermon becomes more than a lecture. The sermon will not only speak of hope but confront the worshiper with the hope in the Gospel. So confronted, the worshiper can then move into Holy week prepared to taste the depths of those days because the hope has given a sense of the heights of the resurrection experience.

It is my personal conviction that any sermon, but especially sermons in Lent, must be approached devotionally as well as theologically. The devotional experience allows the Scripture to speak to the preacher. The theological experience allows the preacher to understand the “speaking.” Theology without devotion too easily becomes academic. Devotion without theology becomes too easily retreat into emotion. May both together lead us “rightly to divine the Word of truth” this Lenten Season. Amen.