

Piety Without Pretense, Faith Without Falsehood: The Lenten Journey According to John

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As individual Christians and as a corporate body, the church is invited in Lent to engage in disciplined prayer and reflection on the meaning, purpose, and promise of our lives as creatures of God. The invitation, challenge, and promise of the season are announced in the short lesson from Mark with which the season begins. Like Jesus in Mark 1:9-15, the Gospel reading for the first Sunday of Lent, the church is asked to stand in the wilderness, with temptation and wild beasts on one side and attending angels on the other, and to recognize and rely on the voice of God and the presence of the Spirit to lead us through to renewed relationship with God and one another. In the forty days of Lent, then, the church is asked to follow Jesus into the wilderness. The Lenten season gives us the chance (once again) to move beyond the conventions and pretensions to which we cling and behind which we often hide in our lives with God, and to experience in their place the raw intensity of a wilderness sojourn with God.

The Gospel lessons for Lent provide one point of entry for the worshipping community into this wilderness sojourn. The season begins with Jesus' baptism and temptation (Mark 1:9-15) and ends with the Palm Sunday entrance into Jerusalem (Mark 11:1-11). These are familiar markers on the church's Lenten journey, as these stories appear at the same place in each of the three lectionary cycles. What may not be so familiar to the preacher are the three Johannine texts that anchor the center of the season. On the surface the three texts appear to be quite distinct from one another—the cleansing of the temple (John 2:13-22); a discourse by Jesus on belief and judgment (John 3:14-21); a collection of teachings on the death of Jesus (John 12:20-33)—but each one points toward a way of living faithfully that is grounded in truth and honesty before God, and as such provides a guide for the church's sojourn in the Lenten wilderness.

John 2:13-22 (The Third Sunday in Lent)

The church is more familiar with this episode in Jesus' ministry as one of the events of Passion week, since that is where the story of Jesus' "cleansing" of the Jerusalem temple is located in the synoptic Gospels (Matt. 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-48). The Gospel of John, however, positions this story as one of the initial acts of Jesus' ministry, following immediately upon the miracle of turning water into wine at Cana (2:1-11). The location of this tradition in the synoptic Gospels is probably more historically reliable; it seems unlikely that the temple authorities would have tolerated such a confrontational act at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Nonetheless, it is imperative in preaching this text for Lent that the differences between the Fourth Gospel and synoptic locations of the temple cleansing be honored. In John, this story does not narrate the event that served as the catalyst for Jesus' arrest in his last days, but belongs to the very earliest days of Jesus' ministry. In John, Jesus' words and actions in the temple boldly announce who Jesus is and how God is present in him, and it is in this announcement that this text's Lenten offering can be found.

The temple narrative in John contains two parts: Jesus' actions in the temple (2:14-17) and his saying about the destruction of the temple (2:18-22).¹ The narrative detail in the description of Jesus' actions in the temple in vv. 14-16—the whip with which he drives out the sheep and cattle, the image of Jesus pouring out the coins of the money changers—conveys the urgency and intensity of Jesus' actions (cf. the descriptions of Jesus' actions in the other three Gospels). Jesus' words to the dove sellers in v. 16 express the cause of this urgency, "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace." Unlike in the synoptic Gospels, where Jesus complains that the temple has been turned into a "den of robbers," (a quotation of Isa. 56:7 and Jer. 7:11; see Matt. 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 10:46), here the complaint is much more sweeping. Jesus' criticism is not with the fiscal corruption that accompanies the activities in the temple, but with the activities themselves. It is the very act of buying and selling that evokes Jesus' zeal for the temple (cf. v. 17). Since such trade was necessary to maintain the worship practices of the temple cult,² Jesus' words and actions cut to the very heart of what it means to worship God. His actions are a direct assault on the entire temple system.

It is not surprising that "the Jews," that is, the Jewish religious authorities, request a sign from Jesus as a warrant for his bold actions (v. 18). The warrant Jesus gives is the somewhat enigmatic saying about the destruction and rebuilding of the temple (v. 19). The "Jews" interpret Jesus' words as referring to the physical temple in Jerusalem (v. 20), a misunderstanding that the narrator quickly corrects for the reader (v. 21). The temple to which Jesus refers is his body, and the destruction and raising to which he refers is his death and resurrection (cf. v. 22).

The sign that Jesus gives as warrant for his actions in the temple, then, is his death and resurrection. Jesus has the authority to challenge the authority of the temple system because his life and death bear witness to the power and presence of God. For Jesus to speak of "the temple of his body" is for him to present himself as the locus of God's presence on earth, a claim that has resounded from the opening verses of the Gospel of John (e.g., 1:1, 11-13, 14, 18, 51). God is known and visible, God is met and experienced, not in the ritual practices of the temple, but in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

As a teaching for Lent, this lesson invites us to look at the way we live our lives with God and one another and to examine the sources of power and authority which shape our lives and to which we regularly make appeal. Do our spiritual and religious practices, both individual and corporate, derive from the incarnate presence of the love of God in Jesus? Or have we, like the money changers and dove sellers, become so inured by our long-standing habits and customs that we can no longer recognize a fresh offer from God in our lives? The Jesus who speaks to us from this text calls us to enter anew into the presence of God, who drives away the pretensions and conventions of our religious life and asks us to live inside and out of his death and resurrection.

John 3:14-21 (The Fourth Sunday in Lent)

The Gospel lesson for the fourth Sunday in Lent is an excerpt from the discourse that concludes the exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus (3:1-21). John 3:1-10 contains a dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus in which Jesus invites Nicodemus to be "born from above" (vv. 3, 5-8), an invitation to which Nicodemus responds with resistance and misunderstanding (vv. 4, 9). At v. 11 the text shifts from dialogue to monologue, as Nicodemus fades from view and the words of Jesus alone sound from

the page. The lectionary lesson begins in the middle of Jesus' discourse, which has the effect of isolating these words from their context. Yet it is crucial that the interpreter hear the words of this discourse against the background of Jesus' initial offer of new life to Nicodemus.³

Indeed, the three verses with which the lectionary lesson begins (vv. 14-16) provide the key to understanding this offer. The expression "lift up" contains a wordplay in Greek; the verb *hupsoo* means both "lift up physically" and "exalt." To speak of the lifting up of the Son of Man, then, refers both to the physical act of lifting up the Son of Man on the cross and to the exaltation of the Son of Man that this physical act entails. For John, the moment of crucifixion is the moment of exaltation, because it initiates the indivisible sequence of death, resurrection, and ascension, events that mark Jesus' completion of God's work.

The lifting up of Jesus on the cross makes possible the gift of eternal life to those who believe in him (v. 15). The promise of eternal life is not a promise of immortality, but the promise of life lived in the unceasing presence of God, a possibility made real by the life and death of Jesus, the incarnate presence of God. The lifting up of Jesus on the cross makes this new life available in the present life of the believer, because in the life and death of Jesus the believer comes face to face with the fullness of the life-giving love of God (3:16).

As all-embracing as this offer of life and love is, there is a catch. The world must decide whether or not to embrace this offer, whether or not to believe that Jesus embodies God's love for the world (3:17-21). This need for decision making is the context in which to understand the language of judgment with which this lesson ends. Judgment occurs in the moment of deciding whether to believe in Jesus' offer of life to the world. The language of judgment in these verses may sound harsh and unyielding to the contemporary ear, until we remember that this language is really the mirror image of the language of grace. God and Jesus are not the judges here; God's offer of love and grace in Jesus sets up the moment of judgment, and we judge ourselves by our response to God's love. When we receive God's grace, we enter into new life. When we reject it, we exclude ourselves from that life.

The decision that John 3:14-21 places before the church resonates even more intensely in the Lenten season. There may be no better place to contemplate the decision for life with God than this text describes than in the forty days of Lenten wilderness, because in the wilderness it is difficult, if not impossible, to hide from the moment of decision. We travel through the Lenten wilderness without the comfortable accoutrements of habit and routine that we often use to seduce ourselves into believing that we do not have to decide for life. This Johannine text calls our hand on such rationalization by stripping our life with God down to the bare essentials. We are called to embrace the offer of love and new life that God makes available to us in the life and death of Jesus, and to allow our lives to begin anew as a result of that embrace.

John 12:20-33 (The Fifth Sunday in Lent)

This final lesson from John presents the reader with a series of teachings in which Jesus interprets the significance of his own death.⁴ One of the more striking features of these teachings, and one that is especially relevant for the use of this text in Lent, is the note of urgency and immediacy that sounds throughout this passage. The section opens with Jesus' announcement of the arrival of the hour of his glorification (v. 23)

and closes with a declaration that the present moment is the moment of the judgment of the world (vv. 31-32).

In order to understand Jesus' teachings in this lesson, it is important to remember that in the Gospel of John, "glorification" refers to Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. The arrival of the hour in which the Son of Man will be glorified, then, means the arrival of the hour in which Jesus will die, and the final acts of his mission in the world will be played out. The arrival of the hour, then, is the arrival of the decisive eschatological moment, the moment when God's new age, God's promises for God's people, come to fulfillment. The arrival of Jesus' hour alters the way time is reckoned, because it is the decisive moment in time. God's future possibilities for the world now become present possibilities as a result of Jesus' gift of his life.

As was also the case with the previous lesson from John 3, people have a share in those possibilities only insofar as they chose to embrace Jesus' offer: "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also" (vv. 25-26). At the heart of the Johannine understanding of the death of Jesus is the conviction that Jesus' death on a cross is an act that he freely chose (10:17-18), out of his love for God and his followers. His death is the fullest expression of his love, a love that knows no limits. To follow Jesus, then, means to love as Jesus loves, to love without limits, for it is only in such unfettered love that one has the possibility of life. To love one's life is the opposite of Jesus' own action, and so places one outside of the community shaped by Jesus' gift of his own life. To love one's life therefore leads inevitably to the loss of any possibility of genuine life with God. To hate one's life "in this world" is not an appeal for an ascetic renunciation of life in the physical sphere, but an appeal to renounce life shaped by the categories of the world and instead to embrace the life that Jesus' gift of love makes available. Love and hate, life and death are all redefined by Jesus' death.

It is in the context of this radical redefinition that the language of judgment in v. 31 must be understood. The arrival of the moment of eschatological possibility is also the arrival of the moment of eschatological reckoning. The world will be judged in its response to Jesus' hour. As the universal language of v. 32 ("all people") makes clear, there are no limits on the offer of new life grounded in Jesus' love. The only limits are those we set for ourselves in the way we respond to this love.

Jesus' death on the cross shows the church the power of the love of God; that with this love, there are no limits, no impossibilities. The season of Lent positions the church before the very same decisions that rest at the heart of this text from John 12. The way through the Lenten wilderness is to face honestly into the urgency and immediacy of the present moment, and embrace in this present moment the arrival of God's eschatological promises for new life with God and one another.

Notes

¹ For a more detailed exegetical treatment of this text, see Gail R. O'Day, *John*, vol.9 of *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 543-545.

² For example, cattle, sheep, and doves were required for burnt offerings (see Lev. 1 and 3). Since many pilgrims would have come to Jerusalem from great distances, they could not bring their sacrificial offerings with them and needed to purchase them at the temple.

³ O'Day, *John*, 548-555.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 710-715.