

Preaching the Old Testament at Easter

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The title of this essay would seem to be a kind of oxymoron. In the church's preaching in general, the Old Testament comes out on the short end of the stick. One may properly raise questions about that and criticize the paucity of preaching from the Old Testament. In this instance, however, surely it is justified. If ever there is a moment in the Christian year when the focus of preaching has to be on the New Testament, it is Easter.

While not wanting to argue with such an obvious claim, I would nevertheless suggest there are significant ways, even at Easter, in which the *whole* of Scripture still remains the quarry from which the church's preaching is hewn and that the Old Testament remains a part of the witness to the power of God that we have come to know especially in the good news of Christ's resurrection from the dead. Justification for keeping the Old Testament in the church's preaching at Easter has at least three grounds:

1. It was specifically to the Old Testament that the church turned to understand who Jesus was and to interpret the passion of Christ. It came to comprehend the meaning of his suffering and death only as it listened carefully to its scriptures, especially the Psalms and the prophets. One of the side effects of the effort to hear the Old Testament on its own terms has been the dulling of our ears to its powerful prophetic and anticipatory notes.

2. The church's preaching is not necessarily from either the Old Testament or the New Testament but is the preaching of the gospel as found in both contexts. That is no less true at Easter and in its preparation than it is at Advent and Christmas.

3. Jesus' resurrection is an instance, indeed the confirming instance, of the power of God to raise the dead and the testimony that death is not the final or definitive word about our life. The resurrection is, however, just that, and the church must hear in this gospel word the testimony to God's power in our behalf and not become so fascinated by the specifics of the resurrection of Jesus that it forgets that our aim at Easter is to praise the God whose power over death is now made sure and who still lives as Christ with us. It may be that some attending to the Old Testament may take us away from body inspection and tomb excavation and toward the praise of God.

On the Way to the Cross—and Beyond

In the early preaching of "the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 8:12), Philip is sent under divine impetus (an angel and the Spirit) to meet an Ethiopian, apparently a "God-fearer," that is, a Gentile who reads the Scriptures of Israel and worships the Lord. At least that is how he is encountered in this text. The intentionality behind the story is evident; this is not a casual encounter. Not only does the Spirit send Philip into the chariot of the Ethiopian at a very precise moment, but when it is over, the Spirit whisks Philip away. One may presume that the text the Ethiopian is reading is no happenstance. He is reading from Isaiah 53, specifically verses 7-8, and does not understand what he is reading. More precisely,

he has one question. It is the perennial question for readers of this text, from its earliest Jewish interpreters to the most contemporary seminary class of students: Of whom does this account of the silent and innocent suffering of one for others speak? Or as the Ethiopian puts it: "About whom does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" What is to be especially noted at this point is what happens next: "Then Philip began to speak, and *starting with this scripture*, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:35).

Isaiah's account of the suffering servant thus becomes the beginning of the proclamation of the good news. One might say that Philip simply grabs the occasion because this was the text that was open. But there is too much self-consciousness and intentionality in this account to allow for that. This is *the* text, the one that opens up the preaching of the gospel. One is compelled, therefore, to ask if there is a lesson for the proclamation of the good news by the church, that it may, and perhaps should, start with the recounting of the Old Testament portrayal of the one who was the servant of the Lord, and particularly with the account of the suffering, rejection, and final exaltation of this one in whom the will and purpose of the Lord was achieved.

What might, then, be the focus and emphases of such preaching that arose out of the recounting of the work of the servant in the book of Isaiah?

1) The suffering of the servant of the Lord, which comes at least in large part at the hands of others, is the *purpose and work of God* ("Yet it was the will/purpose of the Lord to crush him with pain/sickness."). One cannot tell from the prophet's report of the servant what all suffering is meant, but there is no question that it involves at least rejection and oppression by others and that what happens is at the same time God's clear intention.¹ "The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." The suffering and death of God's servant is a human experience and by human oppression. It is no less the will of God. The Old Testament account of "my servant" in Isaiah 53 is probably clearer and more direct about this than any New Testament interpretation of the death of Jesus.

2) A number of the New Testament texts that quote from or allude to Isaiah 53 do not particularly identify the suffering and death of Jesus as an atoning death.² But the extent to which the church hears in this chapter some interpretation of the work of God in and through "my servant" and sees in "my servant" the person and work of Jesus Christ, the will and purpose of God in the suffering and death of the servant is explicitly *God's way of dealing with the reality of human sin*, and the wrongful death of the innocent one is God's way of justifying the sinful many. The perversion of judgment of "my servant," who is innocent, becomes God's way of dealing with the sin of the perverted ones, those who "have all turned to our own way" (v. 6). The proclamation of Isaiah 53 serves to keep the church mindful of the meaning of the passion and death of Christ so that it does not lose track of that meaning as it becomes engrossed in the passion play. Isaiah 53 is not itself a significant part of the Passion story; another Old Testament text comes to play there (see below). It is the Isaiah "story," however, that serves to let the church know what is going on "behind the scenes."

3) Isaiah 53 provides a way of understanding the outcome for the "many" as well as for the innocent one. For the "many," and for those who in reading this chapter find themselves among the "we" who speak in its text, that outcome is described as *healing and wholeness or peace (šalôm)*: "upon him was the punishment that made us whole and by his bruises we are healed" (v. 5). That this text should present the outcome so

totally in the language of healing and wholeness, of the restoration of peace with God, suggests that such a way of understanding what God has accomplished in the death of Christ is a fruitful way of thinking and talking. Thus preaching that focuses on this subject may want to appropriate some of the same motifs and begin to think about the relationship between forgiveness and healing, between justice or judgment and peace and reconciliation. The apostle Paul seems to appropriate some of this understanding in one of the places where the language of Isaiah 53 is explicitly in view: "...who was handed over to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification. Therefore since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 4:25-5:1).

4) The New Testament itself sees among the prominent testimonies of Isaiah 53 the word not only about the rejection of "my servant" but also about his vindication and exaltation. So the proclamation of this text should not focus entirely upon the suffering and its rationale but should start and end where the text itself starts and ends, with the exaltation of the servant. Surely this has much to do with the passage that Philip interprets for the Ethiopian as the beginning of the proclamation of the good news about Jesus Christ. The passage (53:7-8) concludes, according to the Septuagint, with the words: "For his life is taken away from the earth." This is probably to be understood in this context as a reference to the ascension of Jesus and so to his vindication and exaltation, an understanding of the ultimate fate of "my servant" that is anticipated at the beginning of the account in Isaiah (52:13). The poem about the servant in Isaiah is not simply about his suffering. It holds the whole story together, and so its proclamation allows one to anticipate the successful accomplishment of the purpose of God through "my servant" and the prospering of the servant without diminishing the depth of suffering that belonged to that accomplishment.

On its way to the cross and beyond, the church listens also to the Psalms and especially to Psalm 22. That is certainly the case in light of the extent to which that text serves in the New Testament to provide the chief interpretive clues to the meaning of the suffering and death of Jesus.³ But the church's attention to this psalm is itself a reflection of the way in which Psalm 22 serves to model the human situation in extremis and to provide words that portray both the human condition in distress and the joyful expression of praise and thanksgiving that arises when the prayers of the afflicted human being are heard and answered. The quotation of the opening words of the psalm on the lips of Jesus on the cross is the primary point of entry into the psalm because these words make it clear that this one who dies there is not only the servant of the Lord whose suffering is in our behalf. There on the cross is also the one who is not only *for us*—"wounded for our transgressions"—but *one of us*, identifying in the moment of suffering with all who find themselves destroyed and oppressed, sick and sorrowing, beset behind and before. The depth of that human experience is surely no more starkly set forth as a sense of divine abandonment than in those opening words. But the appropriation of other verses from this psalm as well as from other laments of the Psalter testifies to the way in which Jesus' suffering and death was not simply "foretold" in the psalms but was understood as *embodied* in these outcries. The psalms of lament as primary bearers of the meaning of the suffering and death thus let us know that this suffering of "my servant" was not only God's purpose for dealing with our sins but also God's work to overcome our suffering. Psalm 22 is about the human predicament. It has to do with God and with others, and experientially it is

marked by suffering and oppression, the specific character of which remains open. But it is not explicitly a cry of confession or repentance. It is a cry for God's help in the face of suffering and death. In the New Testament's appropriation of this psalm, we learn that Jesus took upon himself the pain and suffering of human existence, even unto death. The full implications of incarnation are never clearer than in the resonances between this psalm and the experience of Jesus. Our cry for help, represented in the prayer of Psalm 22, became his prayer for help.

So his vindication became our vindication and the sure word that in Jesus' death, God's work to overcome not only sin, but also suffering and death, has been accomplished. And even as the account of the servant in Isaiah 53 anticipates the vindication and exaltation of the servant of the Lord, so Psalm 22 holds together in one the terrible suffering of the human being in distress and the marvelous praise and thanksgiving that flow forth when the cry for help has been heard and God has responded and delivered. Both of these texts tell the whole story, and that is part of their appropriateness for Easter and the days before.

Drawing on the work of George Steiner, Walter Brueggemann has reminded us of the long Saturday between the darkness and death of Friday and the light and resurrection of Sunday.⁴ That is a time of silence and hopelessness. Such silence and hopelessness that are then broken up in surprise and wonder is to be found even in Psalm 22, between verse 21a and verse 21b. We do not know what goes on between the cry, "Save me!" (21a) and the declaration "you have answered me" (21b). But the silence of that emptiness is where we live and wait.

It may well be that Psalm 22 in its fullness provides the best text for preaching from Good Friday to Easter, the first half of the Psalm providing the text for Good Friday, and the song of thanksgiving in the second part providing the Easter text. For Saturday—maybe Psalm 88. Not for preaching, of course — there is no proclamation on Saturday. There is only the incongruity of both waiting and hoping, waiting in hopelessness and hoping in anticipation because we know something. Perhaps the reading of Psalm 88 several times on Saturday will keep us from waiting as if there is nothing at stake, as if three days is only a passing moment, when for those who have truly seen his death it is an eternity.

Praising the God Who Raises from the Dead

Saturday is too soon for the final section of Psalm 22 (vv. 22-31), but that song of thanksgiving become testimony is truly the Old Testament text for Easter. For the proclamation of Easter is from beginning to end the sound of praise and thanksgiving. The proclamation of Psalm 22 as a text for Easter does at least two things. For one, it is entirely a testimony to the *power of God* that has wrought the deliverance prayed for so poignantly in doubt and trust in the first part of the psalm. If the beginning of Psalm 22 is the explicit voice of the Crucified One, the song of thanksgiving at the end is the implicit voice of the Risen One. In the same manner in which Jesus always pointed to God in his teaching and healing, the song of thanksgiving in Psalm 22 does nothing but call for the praise of God. The only word to be sounded, and the only word to be sounded at Easter, is the final and climactic word of Psalm 22: "He has done it!" (v. 31). The empty tomb is not a witness to Christ; it is a witness to the God who raises from the dead, of which the Christ is the firstborn whose resurrection is the primary testimony to the power of God over death. The church joins with the Risen One bearing

witness that "The Lord has done it!" and so we need fear death no longer.

Psalm 22 further suggests that the witness to God's power evoked by this event of deliverance is a witness that goes on and on in time and space. It begins in the congregation, but the ones who praise the God who has answered the cry of the oppressed one extend to "the ends of the earth," to "all the families of the nations" (v. 27). Nor is there any moment when such Hallelujahs are not sounded. For those who are already dead in the Lord will bow down and praise the Lord. And "people yet unborn" will come to know this story and respond with their praise and thanksgiving (v. 31).

The particular psalm that has come to the fore in the liturgy of Easter Day functions in a similar way. It is Psalm 118, and its text once more encompasses the whole of the Easter Week experience, except that in this instance it is particularly the church's claim about the meaning of Easter that comes to the fore. Several dimensions thus belong to its proclamation:

1) The psalm does not tell a story in quite the same sense as one can perceive in the movement of the servant poem of Isaiah 53 or even of Psalm 22. It moves back and forth from joy to petition, from thanks and exultation to recollection of the terrible trouble and near death. There is not a single direction or a neat logic.

2) The repetition of the opening hymn of thanks (v. 1) again at the end of the psalm (v. 29) serves to set the whole of the psalm as an expression of praise and thanksgiving. All the petition of the psalm, all the references to distress in the psalm are retrospective and now subsumed under the conviction that the Lord "has become my salvation" (v. 14). So "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever."

3) The deliverance is attested as both individual and communal. There is an "I" who dominates in the song and whose deliverance is recounted in various ways. But there is also a wider group in this psalm who have themselves cried out (v.25) and who together rejoice and give thanks. The relationship between the "I" and the "we/us" is not delineated. Both are beneficiaries of God's power and purpose to save. The Easter deliverance is the power of God to redeem the one who died on the cross, but it is also that same power that in Christ now gives life and light (v.27) to all.

4) One indication that the passion of Jesus cannot be read into the psalm in an overly simple way is the claim of the "I" of the psalm that "he did not give me over to death." But what is heard even in that assurance is one of the three central claims of the psalm that surely belong at the heart of its preaching on Easter. That is the exultant cry in verse 17: "I shall not die, but I shall live!" Here the church discerns both the implicit words of the Risen One and the further implication for each one who now, through the resurrection of Christ, is given the words of life. James Mays has marked the sharp contrast between this assertion and the natural human condition:

The normal human predicament is that, because we must die, the expectation of our final negation infects our living in all kinds of conscious and subliminal ways. The church has found in verse 17 the expression of the transformation worked by the resurrection in one's fundamental stance in life. The way in which believers face every threat and crisis and need is colored by the knowledge that God has not given us over to death. "We whose life is hid with Christ in God ought to meditate on this psalm all the days of our lives, Col. 3:3" (Calvin, 4:325).⁵

5) A further claim of the psalm and one of the main reasons it has come into the Easter life of the community of faith is the announcement that “the stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone” (v. 22). While the image may simply be a poetic way of talking about startling reversal, it is exactly that unbelievable turn around that is the good news of Easter. The specific illustration so captures that reality, particularly with its notions of rejection and vindication, indeed exaltation, as the rejected one becomes the head or chief. It is a similar note to what the New Testament writers heard in Isaiah 53. The one now exalted by the power of God was the one rejected in suffering and death at the hands of the world. “The marvelous thing is that the one whom our human instincts and wisdom reject, God has nonetheless, in spite of us and for our salvation, made the chief cornerstone.”⁶

6) The final and central claim of the psalm is evident throughout but reaches its peak in verses 23 and 24:

This is the Lord’s doing;
It is marvelous in our eyes.
This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

The resurrection is “the Lord’s doing.” The deliverance wrought that first Easter is God’s work. The first and third lines echo each other, as do the second and fourth lines. They provide the structure of faith that Easter evokes. The starting point is the claim (vv. 23a and 24a) that on that day the Lord acted. All naturalistic explanations fall before the reality that this is not human work. This is God’s doing. The first line of verse 24 is richly ambiguous. We know it primarily as the indicator that Sunday has been given to us by the Lord’s marvelous deed of raising Jesus from the dead. By that act, the Lord has made this day for us. So every Sunday, the church celebrates and gives praise for the wonder of God’s victory over death accomplished in and through the resurrection of Jesus. But another translation of this line is equally possible. It echoes the conclusion of Psalm 22 quite precisely: “This is the day the Lord has acted.” This is the day the Lord has done it! In such a manner the text points powerfully to the significance of this moment in all of human and cosmic history. This day is not like any other day. This is the day that God has done what could not be done and raised Jesus from the dead.

So then, faith sees what God has done and responds in several ways:

It stands in awe and wonder before “the Lord’s doing.” “It is marvelous in our eyes,” say the singers of Psalm 118. The term for “marvelous” (*nipla’ot*) belongs to a stock of words of the same root that Walter Brueggemann has properly translated as “impossible,” “too difficult,” or in the nominal form: impossibilities.⁷ It is this word with which the angelic messengers confront old Sarah and, centuries later, young Mary as they announce the birth of a child: “Is anything too difficult (*yippale’*) for the Lord?” It is the same word that Jeremiah hears when he scoffs at being told to buy land in Judah when the Babylonian army is at the gates of Jerusalem: “See, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh; is anything too difficult (*yippale’*) for me?”⁸ Brueggemann has rightly noted that such impossibilities become possible — births to old women and young virgins, new life in the face of death, and resurrection of the dead — require a new kind of epistemology, a new way of knowing. Where such a new way of knowing is

possible, two more things will happen.

The community will sing for joy and shout the praise of God because what has not been has been, what was impossible has happened, death has given way to life. If there is weeping and sorrow and sadness in the days before, the sounds of Easter are only joy and exultation, giving thanks and praising God for what we have seen and heard. But our joy is not self-contained. It is recounted and told to all who will listen and be drawn into the circle of praise. "I shall not die, but I shall live, *and recount the deeds of the Lord*" (v. 17). The good news of what God has done in raising Jesus from the dead is told and retold. The ripple of praise that begins on Easter Day and extends through time and space carries with it an ongoing and never-ending testimony to what God has done for us.

The wonder and joy and recounting all come together in the church's hymns of praise. Nothing so brings the fullness of our sense of what Easter is about than "when in our music God is glorified."⁹ The tradition of many churches to conclude the Easter morning service with the Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's *Messiah* is a continuing testimony to the fact that Easter cannot be celebrated by proclamation alone. That must join with the song and music of the church as it sings, "Hallelujah, the Lord God omnipotent reigneth!"

Notes

¹ The account of the servant in Isaiah 53 suggests both sickness and deformity as possible indications of the source of the servant's suffering, as well as oppression and apparently death at the hands of others. That the text is poetic and metaphorical, elliptical and ambiguous, means of necessity that one cannot read here a kind of prophecy of the life story of Jesus, though many have been tempted to do so. There are resonances between the passage and the experience of Jesus that lead us to place the two stories in conversation, but one cannot push that conversation too far in its details.

² In this regard, see the discussion of the explicit quotations from Isaiah 53 and their context in Donald Juel, *Messianic Exegesis: Christological Interpretation of the Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 119-133.

³ For a concise overview of the New Testament quotations of and allusions to this psalm, see John Reumann, "Psalm 22: Lament and Thanksgiving for Jesus Christ," *Interpretation* 28 (1974): 39-58.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 400-403.

⁵ James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 380.

⁶ Ibid, 381.

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, "'Impossibility' and Epistemology in the Faith Traditions of Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 18:1-15)," in Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. by Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 167-88.

⁸ Jeremiah has assumed that nothing is too difficult for the Lord in his prayer (32:17), but the conclusion of the prayer implicitly undercuts the previous assumption, as is indicated by the Lord's response and question back to Jeremiah.

⁹ See the marvelous hymn of that title by Fred Pratt Green.