

Preaching the Lenten Texts

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Lent 1: We Shall Remember The Story

I remember in seminary when I first thought about worship as the place and time to learn and be formed by God's reality, as opposed to what I saw, heard, and believed every day in the "real" world. At first, it was a difficult point of view to comprehend. I had never considered the possibility that false stories of domination swirled around me and threatened to undo me. I had never made conscious distinctions between the false stories of my "real" world and God's story as revealed through Scripture. That discovery was an eye-opening and soul-changing moment. Worship became the primary moment and the primary place for me to hear and see what was truly real. It was, or rather, is, the time when *The* story of God's salvation gets rehearsed and remembered in the hope of weeding out the false stories of the powers and the principalities, the stories of domination and the marketplace, that swirl around us and in us every day.

We are starting our Lenten journey with that same straightforward emphasis. Before beginning our walk to Jerusalem and the cross, we stop to remember and rehearse *The* story of God's salvation history. In all four readings for this Sunday, we hear the importance of remembering *The* story, God's story of claiming and deliverance. We hear the importance of letting that reality wash over us and remake us so that we might continue to be faithful. The two texts on which I focus for this Sunday are Deuteronomy 26:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13.

We literally see the importance of rehearsing *The* story in our text from Deuteronomy. This text (which is a great stewardship text, by the way) emphasizes the importance of both memory and generosity. The people Israel were in danger of losing their story. God's chosen people had plunged into a time of religious and political crisis. Stories of domination swirled around them, threatening to take the last thing the people still had – their memories. False stories threatened to replace the people's memory of a God who had claimed them, delivered them from slavery, and called them into a new freedom with new responsibilities as God's chosen people for the sake of the world. They were in danger of forgetting that their story was a story of deliverance, not a story of domination: a story of freedom from, not captivity to.

Given this danger of memory loss, the writer(s) of this text decided to form a liturgy out of this necessity to remember *The* story. "When you come into the land ...you shall take some of the first of all the fruit...and you shall go to the priest...and you shall say..." The writer(s) of the text made this offering a time for rehearsal and remembering their story, *The* story. When they presented their offering to God, they had to speak out loud the way God had claimed them, given them a name, and set them free for the sake of God's world. When they walked into their space of worship, they had to speak out loud their real story of deliverance in the hope that it would wash over them, remaking them each time, giving them a new and fresh glimpse of who they were to be as God's chosen people. By this liturgical act of retelling and remembering *The* story, they kept the false stories of domination at bay, and they could live faithfully for

at least another week.

In our gospel lesson, Luke 4:1-13, we see another struggle between the false stories of domination and *The* story of God's salvation. The struggle is dramatically illustrated in Jesus' verbal battle with the tempter in the wilderness. We see Jesus in danger of losing himself, of giving into the false stories of domination voiced by the tempter. The tempter offers Jesus promises of worldly power and influence, of political domination and great success right then and there. The tempter does not ask Jesus to do anything immoral. Instead, the tempter simply asks Jesus to forget. All Jesus had to do is let go of *The* story and let the tempter's stories remake him. It is the same choice we face every day. It is the same choice we have seen in all our other Scripture lessons for this day.

But Jesus refuses to forget *The* story. On the contrary, Jesus quotes from his Scripture (Deuteronomy!) to counteract the temptations. After each temptation, Jesus rehearses *The* story out loud so that it can wash over him, like the waters of his baptism, remaking him and giving him courage to continue his faithfulness of being God's Love Made Flesh for the sake of the world. Jesus refuses to forget and by doing so, gives us even more of a story, *The* story, to which we can cling and by which we are saved.

Lent 2: God's Promise Fulfilled, Even When We Get in the Way

Part of the gift of the Lenten season offers us is a time and space for true honesty. During Lent we are called to honest repentance again and again. We are offered time and space to examine ourselves and our faith communities and the myriad of ways we fall short of living fully into God's image. And yet, this honesty is always couched in the reality of God's grace as proclaimed at the cross and the empty tomb. This need for our honesty and God's enduring grace form our theme for this Sunday. In our Scriptures, we see how God faithfully fulfills God's promises even when (not "if") we get in the way. Despite our sinfulness, God is faithful still. We will explore this theme by looking at Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18 and Luke 13:31-35.

In our Genesis text, we see this theme of God's faithfulness despite our sinfulness beautifully illustrated. In our snippet of the story, we once again overhear a conversation between Abram and God. The Lord had already initiated the covenant with Abram and Sarai by asking them to set out from their land to go where God tells them to go. The Lord had already promised Abram to make his name great. And initially, Abram and Sarai responded faithfully. They did just as they were told. It was an impressive start. But we are not impressed for long.

Even before our text for today, we see Abram starting to get in God's way a bit. He takes care of himself on his journey, but he puts the other recipient of God's promise, Sarai, at risk in Egypt by telling the Pharaoh that she is his sister instead of his wife. But lest we think Abram is the only one who gets in God's way, immediately after today's text we see Sarai take matters into her own hands and give Hagar to Abram so he might hurry up and have an heir. Those two stories of human sinfulness and impatience surround this Sunday's story of Genesis 15.

In our text for today, we are shown once again the faithfulness of God. The Lord comes to Abram at night. And Abram starts his complaint. "When are you going to do what you promised?" he asks. God responds by reassuring Abram that the promise will be fulfilled in God's own way and in God's own time. God even solidifies the promise with an official covenant making ceremony. Abram should rest easy and

trust, right? Perhaps. But throughout the rest of their story, we, the readers, frequently see this pattern of human sinfulness and God's grace playing out again and again. It took Abram and Sarai their entire lives to figure out God's promises are sure. And yet, even though Abram and Sarai consistently fell short of fully living into their call and constantly got in God's way, God was faithful still.

Jesus, in Luke 13:31-35, finds himself both lamenting humanity's sinfulness and proclaiming God's promises fulfilled in his own being. Like a mother hen (as opposed to Herod, the destructive fox), Jesus longs to shelter his young. The problem is the chicks refuse the shelter. This is a powerful example of how we, as humans, fall short and get in God's way. Jesus lifts his wings and calls our names, but we refuse to go in. And yet, Jesus ends his lament with words of promised fulfillment. Jesus proclaims there will be a day when the people will say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord" (v.35). He proclaims there will be a day when the people seek out his shelter, fall into his wings, and follow him completely. Even on his way to the cross, facing the fox Herod and all the others, knowing he will be betrayed, abandoned, and killed, Jesus still proclaims that God is faithful still and will keep all of God's promises. Furthermore, Jesus tells us there will also be a day when we creatures stop getting in God's way and that pattern ceases.

Lent 3: God Does Not Give Us What We Deserve. Thank God (literally)!

Imagine that by this point in the Lenten season, your congregation members have been engaged in a lot of self-reflection and confession. If they "gave up" something for Lent, it is starting to hit them by now. If they "took on" something like a spiritual discipline for Lent, the newness and excitement of the undertaking is beginning to wear off. They might be starting to ask questions like "Am I sure I can keep this up?" In my own congregation, this is the third Sunday the word "Alleluia" has been missing from our mouths. Lenten worship is intentionally bare and the shadow of the cross looms larger and larger with each passing day. The dust from Ash Wednesday gets stuck in our throats on the journey through the Lenten wilderness.

But then, as we arrive on this third Sunday of Lent, three of our four Scripture lessons (I have no idea what to do with the Epistle lesson for this Sunday) are offered to us like cups of cool water in the barrenness of Lenten wilderness. On this Sunday, I am focusing on the Isaiah 55 passage and Psalm 63. But you can certainly extrapolate this theme of God's generosity and mercy into the Lukan parable as well.

If you want to do something creative with your Scripture reading, this is the Sunday to do it! I see this text from Isaiah 55:1-9 as a marvelous text to perform and not simply read. By "perform," I mean the preacher could memorize it, stand in the middle of the sanctuary and truly proclaim it to her congregation. Can't you just see it? Let the powerful invitation of the text speak for itself. Look into the eyes of your congregation members when you speak these words of gracious invitation and mercy. Look into their faces when you ask, "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?" Can't you feel the power of that proclamation? Whatever you do, do not simply read this text. Find a way to embody it so that it might take off in the imaginations of the people.

This text comes near the end of Isaiah. By this point of the story, the people are exhausted by enemy and exile, desolation and death.¹ Isaiah claims all of their suffering was caused by their own sinfulness. The people sinned against God (42:24)

and God hid God's face (54:8). But then (hear the echoes of mercy already?), God chose not to abandon God's people but to keep God's promises. Even in the face of their sinfulness, God invites them to live abundantly, to feast on a full life, to receive the blessings that God will still pour out upon them, regardless of their past (55:7). The entire focus of this text is God's graciousness and mercy. This passage is indeed a cup of cold water on the walk to the cross.

Our psalm for this day, Psalm 63:1-8, is a beautiful response to the Isaiah text. The soul of the psalmist is thirsty for God. He clearly knows that God, God's very self, is the only one who will fill him, satisfy him, and keep him. In this passage, God's presence and steadfast love become the feast on which the psalmist partakes (too bad this is not a communion Sunday). This psalm certainly mirrors our dry and dusty Lenten journey; like the Isaiah text, it becomes God's cup of cold water on the way.

Now, we must be honest and recognize that if we keep reading past the lectionary selection, we quickly see that the psalmist may not necessarily have God's gracious mercy in mind for everyone. He proclaims that his enemies are going straight down to the depths to be given over to the power of the sword and to the mouths of the jackals. Whether or not God follows through with the wishes of the psalmist, only God knows. But the entire psalm (including the last verses) could be a fascinating conversation partner with the Luke 13:1-9 fig tree parable.

Lent 4: Nevertheless God Makes Us New Creations

The closer we get to the cross, the more our focus seems to be on God's great compassion and overwhelming, vulnerable love made known to us in Jesus our Christ. It seems to me that with each week that passes, our focus is less on our constant need for repentance (though that need is certainly voiced in our psalm for this Sunday) and more on God's compassion and forgiveness of our sinfulness. The closer we get to the cross, the more our focus shifts from the ways in which we fall short to the ways in which God embraces us nevertheless. I remember my late professor Shirley Guthrie almost shouting in our theology class, "The gospel is a great 'nevertheless.' God sees us in our sinfulness, sees us better than we see ourselves, but **NEVERTHELESS** God loves us and saves us anyway." Perhaps the entire theme for Lent could be "God's Nevertheless."

We certainly see variations on that theme in all of our Scripture readings, though I must admit the one from Joshua 5 has me stumped. But for this Sunday, our focus will be on the familiar Prodigal Son story found in Luke 15 and 2 Corinthians 5:16-21. I would read them in that order so that the 2 Corinthians text could almost stand as a theological wrap-up for the narrative proclamation of Luke.

Our Luke text is the familiar Prodigal Son story. Sharon Ringe, however, asserts that a better title for this text would be a "Parable of Two Beloved Sons."² Her assertion fascinates me because whenever I have preached this passage I have focused on the younger son, his "coming to himself" (15:17), and the father's running to welcome him home, abundantly pardoning him for everything. I have never focused on either the elder son or the father's response to the elder son as his other beloved child. I am sure I could spend hours in therapy over that one!

However, this year, perhaps the focus could indeed be the story from the elder son's perspective. Craddock's insights tweak my curiosity on this focus. He claims that two elements of the story consistently get neglected in our preaching. First, it was

not necessarily the younger son's being welcomed home that turned off the older son. Both Judaism and Christianity have clear provisions for restoration after appropriate repentance. But where does it say you throw a party for the sinner? Craddock claims that what affected the older son was all the music and the dancing. Why on earth would you celebrate someone who messed up so completely? Does the party cancel out the seriousness of the sin? And if so, why does it bother him (us) so much?

Second, Craddock points out that in this story, we find no losers. The father not only has two children, but the father loves both children, goes out to both children, and was extremely generous with both children. It is not an "either/or" in this story. It is a "both/and" story. Both of the father's children are beloved and winners. Craddock claims this illustrates God's love beautifully.³ This story is indeed a powerful example of God's nevertheless.

And clearly, the 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 passage ties in with this story from Luke. It is the theological summary of what the Lukan parable proclaims. It takes the "Nevertheless" and puts a distinctly Christological focus on it. Why should the elder son no longer view his younger brother as a lost sinner who deserves sackcloth and ashes for the rest of his life? Because of Christ's death and resurrection. Christ's death is the transformative event for all of life. We are no longer to regard anyone from a human point of view. We are no longer to see each other according to the flesh, according to the myriad ways we fall short, according to all the brokenness we each carry around. On the contrary, because of Jesus Christ, we are to see one another through the eyes of grace and mercy. We are to see the brokenness as places through which God's light can clearly shine. We are to see people as remade, restored, and redeemed. That view is clearly the view of the father in the Lukan parable. The challenge is for both of the sons to receive that kind of eyesight as well. "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation..." We fall short, but *nevertheless* God makes us new.

Lent 5: The Great Emptying

Palm/Passion Sunday is almost upon us. But we have one more stop on the journey. And, on this stop, we jump from the Gospel of Luke to the Gospel of John. Our focus on this Sunday is on John 12:1-8 and Philippians 3:4b-14. Our focus is on the Great Emptying.

Again this week, I would want to read the John text before the Epistle reading from Philippians, for I see a direct relationship between Mary's actions in John and Paul's call to action in Philippians. Mary foreshadows the Great Emptying of God on the cross and Paul responds to that Great Emptying.

Since female disciples rarely get the spotlight, I am drawn to this story of Mary. I am drawn to the contrasts between Judas Iscariot and Mary. I am drawn to the strangeness of why she did not anoint his head like a king, but chose to anoint his feet in preparation for his burial. I am drawn to the debates if Mary was a disciple or maybe a prophet. I am drawn to Mary's entire embodied act of pure devotion and complete love.

Mary takes a pound of costly perfume, gets on her knees, empties the bottle on to Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair. The intimacy of her discipleship catches me off guard a bit as I wonder what she knew about him. What would cause her to step out into the spotlight and completely empty the perfume, completely empty herself out

for him? Did she know that he was about to be completely emptied out for the sake of the world? Did she know that just as the aroma of her discipleship wafted through the house, the aroma of his faithfulness and love would soon waft through the whole world? Her act of emptying foreshadows Jesus' act of emptying about to take place.

Then in Philippians, we see Paul's response to Jesus' great act of emptying on the cross. Paul goes through a litany of his own accomplishments, his list of what makes him so great. Then he shreds his resume into pieces and throws them up in the air. Paul claims that all of it is nothing in comparison to knowing Jesus as his Lord. He looks at the cross and the way God's love was poured out for the world and finds himself emptying out all his own claims to fame. All of his own accomplishments are rubbish in the light of what Jesus did for the sake of the world. The faith of Christ gave Paul value, not anything Paul did or did not do. His actions were purely secondary to God's action in Christ. As a disciple, Paul's spiritual work was to go through life learning to let go, to unclench his fists, to empty himself of the false stories and the surface accomplishments. Paul's discipleship was a call to respond to the Great Emptying that God began in the manger, finished on the cross, and proclaimed done in the empty tomb.

Notes

1. Timothy Saleska, "Third Sunday in Lent, Year C," in *The Lectionary Commentary – Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Text: The First Readings*, ed. Roger Van Harn (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William Eerdmanns, 2001), 364.
2. Sharon Ringe, *Luke: Westminster Bible Companion*, eds. Patrick D. Miller and David L. Bartlett (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 206.
3. Fred Craddock, *Luke: Interpretation Commentary*, eds. James Mays, Patrick Miller, and Paul Achtemeier (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 188.