

# *Preaching the Lenten Lectionary*

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Those who are familiar with the church year will expect various themes to be dominant in the lectionary passages assigned to this season. First, since the origin of Lent is in the ancient preparation of candidates for baptism, the theme of water will appear. In addition, since baptism implies a turning from the old life of sin to a new life of discipleship, repentance is a second major concern. Third, since baptism leads to a dedication to the way of Christ, that means the way of the cross, the cost of discipleship is important in this season. Fourth, because the cross leads to the resurrection, death before life, dying before rising, are also themes that can be expected. These are themes that are important not only for those preparing for baptism, but also to the whole congregation, since we are all reminded of what our baptism means.

## *Ash Wednesday*

We begin with Ash Wednesday, with passages that are common to all three years of the lectionary cycle. The Old Testament lesson is either Joel 2:1-2; 12-17 or Isaiah 58: 1-12. In both cases, Israel is called to repentance. This is not merely a liturgical act, a carrying out of religious duties, but a clear, heartfelt repentance that includes a change in the way of life of the people that is to last into the days after the particular act of worship. It needs to be clear that this is a repentance of the whole people of God. It is not simply a call to individual change. What this means for the church is a change in the way the whole congregation acts, the ways it lives its common life. In our highly individualistic society, it is necessary to stress the communal aspect of repentance.

On the other hand, the Psalm selected for this day is Psalm 51, one of the most famous of all the Penitential Psalms. It is very personal, calling for true contrition on the part of the individual. The foil between the communal in the prophetic reading and the personal in the psalm is useful in showing the need for both.

The Epistle reading is II Corinthians 5:20b-6:10. This again is written to a community of faith, not particularly to individuals. Paul has had difficulties with the Corinthian congregation. Here he writes to them, urging that they repent and return to faithfulness. In the process, he points to the hardships he has endured in his own faithful ministry. His description of all that he has suffered points to the character of the Christian life: it leads to dying, but as a way to life; it is sorrowful, but leads to rejoicing; it can bring poverty, but makes others rich. Christians seem to have nothing, and yet they truly possess all things. Read in the context of Lent, this passage shows the way of the cross that leads to true life and encourages those who are already baptized to renew their discipleship.

The Gospel lesson is from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, chapter 6, verses 1-6 and 16-21. Here there is an echo of the prophetic passages: repentance and true piety are to be heartfelt and not for show. The prophets were concerned that the public assembly would be merely a ritual, a duty that would not lead to a change in the community's life. The Gospel passage deals more with individual acts of piety and demands that they be for God alone, and not for gaining public approval.

The preacher for Ash Wednesday obviously needs to stress that repentance is a constant necessity for the people of God. It is not a matter of once and for all. God's people are always falling short of what they are to be, both as a community and as individuals, and they need times of repentance. Again, the connection between personal and corporate repentance is particularly necessary in our day and can easily be overlooked. How does a congregation look at its own life together, its witness in the wider community, its testimony to the world at large, and truly enter into a time of repentance? If we deal only with our own personal lives in this season, we will have lost a great opportunity to regain a strong sense of what it means to be the church, the people of God.

### *First Sunday*

This first Sunday begins to show both the human need for redemption and God's work in history that leads to Christ. The Old Testament lesson is Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7. Here we are told of the Fall, of human sin and its consequences. This theme is picked up in the Epistle reading, Romans 5:12-19, the parallel of Adam and Jesus, the first who permitted sin to condemn humanity and the second who permitted grace to overcome the condemnation. This history of redemption is one that the preacher can follow throughout the season, particularly the first through the fifth Sundays.

The psalm for the first Sunday is Psalm 32. It points to the joy that follows true repentance and the pain that unrepented sin causes. The psalm includes a reference to "the rush of mighty waters" that will not disturb the faithful. If we think of the flood and of the crossing of the Red Sea as ancient occasions when the faithful were rescued from the mighty waters, we can understand why this psalm is significant to those preparing for baptism, when the waters will also be salvific rather than destructive.

The Gospel lesson is Matthew 4:1-11, the temptations of Jesus following his baptism. It is interesting that the temptations occur after the baptism and not before. Especially in traditions that practice believers' baptism only, it appears that the temptations should occur before the decision for faith is made. This passage makes clear that the baptized are not immune to temptation. In fact, it could be argued that once a commitment to the life of discipleship is made, the temptations to leave it grow stronger. Lent reminds us of that fact and gives us a specific time in the year to reflect on our own need for recommitting ourselves and our congregations to the true following of Christ. Just because we call ourselves Christian does not mean that we are not tempted to follow the way of the world. In fact, we can easily fall away from discipleship if we do not have this annual reminder of our frailty.

### *The Second Sunday*

Again we have a pairing of a passage from Genesis and one from Romans, both dealing with the history of God's work of salvation. The Old Testament lesson is Genesis 12:1-4a, the calling of Abram to leave his home and follow the promise of God to a new land. Romans 4:1-5; 13-17 shows that the promise to Abraham came by faith and not by law and is not only for physical descendants of Abraham, but also for those who share his faith. For this reason, Abraham could be the father not only of Israel, but of many nations. If the preacher is dealing with the history of salvation, these passages are obviously central.

The Gospel passage is Matthew 17:1-9, the Transfiguration or John 3:1-17, the

encounter of Jesus with Nicodemus. This is an interesting choice. The Transfiguration has never found a permanent place in the calendar. Only in Year A does this passage come in Lent. In all three years of the cycle, it is placed as the last Sunday before Ash Wednesday, although even there it is a choice. Obviously, if Transfiguration was celebrated at that earlier time, the passage from John would be chosen now. In some ways, the Transfiguration interrupts the Lenten emphases, although it is possible to see this account as giving a foretaste of the glory of the Risen Christ. If in spite of this taste of glory, he continued on his way to the cross, then we also should follow his example, assured that we too will be glorified with him. That probably is why the Sunday before Ash Wednesday is the usual placement.

The Johannine passage points both to the need for a new birth and to the fact of God's love as the central reason for the life and death of the Son of God among us. The mention of the new birth by water and the Spirit would clearly imply baptism to those who were being prepared for it. Even for those already baptized, this should remind them of the meaning of that act: it implies a new birth into a new life that leads both to the cross and to the risen life with Christ.

The psalm is Psalm 121, the famous affirmation that only God is our help in all situations and that we have no reason to fear anything. For those about to be baptized and who have heard the difficulties that faithful living can lead to, the awareness that God is our help in all the trouble we may encounter is surely comforting.

### *The Third Sunday*

In this third Sunday we again have an Old Testament passage followed by one from Romans, though the connection is more subtle than on the previous two Sundays. The Old Testament lesson is Exodus 17:1-7, the narrative of the peoples' complaint to Moses that he has led them into danger. They feel that they have been freed from Egypt only to die of thirst in the wilderness. God gives them water from the rock, even though they have complained and have apparently lost their faith in God's future. The water image has overtones of baptism. The Romans passage is 5:1-7, that Christ died for the unrighteous. This parallels God's continued walk with the unfaithful Israelites. Paul speaks of the hardships that have produced faith, the times of difficulty that have proved to us God's love. Israel discovered this same faithfulness on the part of God during their wanderings in the wilderness.

Psalm 95 makes direct reference to the faithlessness of the people's ancestors in the wilderness, when they tested God by demanding water, and if they did not receive it, they would prefer to be back in Egypt.

The Gospel lesson is from John, chapter 4:5-42. It is a very long narrative of the encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well. It includes the mention of the living water that Jesus can give, water that leads to eternal life. Again, for those to be baptized, the reference to what baptism means is clear: it is the source of eternal life, of a life that ends all thirst. It is also a redemptive water that is given to sinful people.

### *The Fourth Sunday*

The next stop in salvation history that the Old Testament lessons give us is the anointing of David as king, as recorded in I Samuel 16:1-13. David is the least likely candidate for royalty among all of the sons of Jesse, and yet he is the one chosen by God. When Samuel is surprised, God's response is that God does not see the way

human beings see, but rather looks at the heart. David is a shepherd, a familiar image in Scripture. The psalm for the day is Psalm 23, which pictures God as the shepherd. The Johannine passage in which Jesus speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd (chapter 10) is not chosen for the Gospel lesson. Instead, the selection is John 9, the entire chapter. It is the account of the healing of a man blind from birth and the ensuing debate among the Pharisees, the parents, the blind man, and Jesus. Jesus utters some very strange words: “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” The Pharisees ask if they are blind, to which Jesus answers that if they were blind, they would have no sin, but since they say that they see, they are judged as sinful.

The unifying theme is sight: God’s, Samuel’s, the Pharisees, and the blind man. Judgment requires sight—or insight—to discern what is true and what is false, or what is good and what is evil. If we say that we see what is good and do not choose it, then we sin. The Pharisees claim to see the good, and yet the healing, which is good, they deny as good. Samuel, when he chooses, is readily corrected by God, so that his choice is no longer what initially appeared good to him, but rather is God’s choice. Lent is a time when we check whether our choices are truly God’s. Is the life we live, both as a congregation and as individuals, the life God chooses? Do we, like Samuel, initially judge what is good by outward appearances? Do we, like the Pharisees in this narrative, deny what is good because it upsets our preconceived ideas?

The Epistle lesson neatly combines these concerns about how we judge. It comes from Ephesians 5:8-14. Instead of sight and blindness, it speaks of light and darkness. We need to walk in the light and choose what is good. To do so, we need to seek what pleases the Lord. We should take no part in the works of darkness. We are to awake from sleep and rise from the dead, so that the light of Christ will shine on us, and we will walk in the paths of righteousness in which God leads us.

### *The Fifth Sunday*

New life is the theme of this Sunday, though it is a new life that comes out of death. The Old Testament lesson is Ezekiel 37:1-14, the Valley of Dry Bones. It is the Word of God that the prophet preaches that brings new life to the bones. In Israel’s history, the prophet’s message is life-giving to the people in exile who had no hope of again being God’s people gathered together in the land. In the Gospel lesson, John 11:1-45, it is the word of the Lord that calls Lazarus from the grave and gives him life. There follows the discourse in which Jesus says that he is the resurrection and the life. The Epistle passage is Romans 8:6-11, in which Paul shows the difference between life lived according to the flesh, a life that leads to death, and life lived in the Spirit, which is life indeed. We who are in Christ live by the same Spirit that raised him from the dead, and we therefore should be dead to sin.

As we come closer and closer to Holy Week, the emphasis becomes sharper on death to the old life and the new life which Christ gives. It is life, but only through death. Israel seemed dead after the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of its leading inhabitants, and yet God was able to bring new life out of this death. We are called to die to sin, and yet in this death, there is new life, a risen life, for us.

The Psalm is number 130, the cry from the depths for God’s forgiveness. No one can stand before God on the basis of personal goodness, but there is forgiveness with God. God’s love can be trusted, and there is redemption for those who trust in that love.

### *The Sixth Sunday*

The preacher needs to make a clear decision about the texts for this Sunday. Two choices are given: Palm Sunday or Passion Sunday. The choice needs to be based on what other services the preacher can expect the congregation to attend between this Sunday and the next, which is Easter. In other words, if the congregation can be expected to attend Maundy Thursday and/or Good Friday services, then the narrative of the Passion can be left to those occasions. However, if the tradition of the congregation is to attend only Sunday services, it is vitally important that the Passion be the major focus now, since it is totally inappropriate for Christians to celebrate Palm Sunday with its triumphal entry into Jerusalem and then go straight to the Resurrection without any mention of the Cross in between.

If Palm Sunday is chosen, then the Gospel lesson is Matthew 21:1-11, the entry into Jerusalem. The psalm is Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29, which is itself a triumphant entry psalm and includes the famous words about the stone that the builders rejected now made the chief cornerstone. Jesus is the true king, and here he receives a taste of the proper reception he should be accorded. Of course, it is short-lived, and his humiliation will follow swiftly. The people who cheered him on did have a glimpse of his greatness, but since the life he offers to them includes the way of the cross and does not bring reward without suffering, he will be rejected quite easily.

There is neither an Old Testament or Epistle lesson suggested for this Sunday as Palm Sunday, and though the lections for Passion Sunday can be used, they clearly are not of the same triumphant spirit.

In a congregation that will not be gathering for Maundy Thursday or Good Friday services, it would be quite easy to begin with the use of palm branches and then move to the lessons for Passion Sunday. In other words, the choice of readings ought not be based on whether or not palms are used, but rather on whether the congregation will have an opportunity to remember the cross before it celebrates the resurrection.

If the Passion Sunday readings are chosen, then there is a choice of Gospel lessons. Again, the choice needs to be based on whether or not there will be a Good Friday service. If there will be, then Maundy Thursday can stress the Last Supper and the betrayal, leaving the cross for the next day. If there is no Good Friday service, the Thursday service needs to include the passion as well as the events of the Last Supper, or else the passion needs to be the main focus on this Sunday.

The psalm is Psalm 31, a plea for deliverance from one who has been scorned by enemies and friends alike and whose only hope is in God, obviously very appropriate for the night of the betrayal. The Epistle lesson is Philippians 2:5-11, the song that calls us to imitate Christ, who was obedient even to death on the cross and who has now been exalted.

### *Holy Week*

The lectionary gives selections for every day of Holy Week, and they are common for all three cycles. Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday various Servant Songs from Isaiah are used, all clearly applicable to Jesus in this week. All use psalms that either cry for deliverance from enemies or show trust that God will deliver. All of the gospel lessons are from John 12 and 13, words of Jesus pointing to his death, or, on Wednesday, words to Judas leading to the betrayal. Two of the epistle lessons are from Hebrews and speak of Jesus' faithfulness to death and his work as high priest. The

other lesson, on Tuesday, is from I Corinthians, Paul's words about the foolishness of the cross to those who are perishing.

### *Maundy Thursday*

There are so many themes in the passages for this day that the preacher will need to choose carefully. Since the lessons are common to all three years of the lectionary cycle, different themes can be left to different years. There is the parallel of the establishment of Passover and of the Lord's Supper, both covenant meals that involve death. There is the feet-washing, along with the new command to love one another, the word in Latin for command being the source of the old English word "maundy." Again, if there is no other communal occasion for a strong emphasis on the cross, it would be wise to emphasize the parallel between the lamb slain for Passover and the death of Christ. Paul's words of institution of the Lord's Supper show the covenant character of this meal, based on Christ's death. The psalm, 116:1-2, 12-19, is a prayer of thanksgiving for rescue and includes words about the cup of salvation, appropriate both to Passover and Communion.

### *Good Friday*

If there is a service on Good Friday, the major point is the reading of the Passion narrative, all three years using the text from John, all of chapters 18 and 19. Psalm 22, which begins with the words of Jesus from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" is the psalm chosen. The Suffering Servant Song from Isaiah 52:13-53:12 is the Old Testament lesson. The Epistle is Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9, Jesus, the High Priest, who is one of us. Whatever else is used, the Passion narrative must hold central place. The lectionary does not do it, but some churches use a conflated form of the narrative, based on "the seven last words," which do not appear together in any one Gospel. This custom, though useful, does a "cut and paste" form of the readings and therefore cannot be simply a gospel reading from a single place in Scripture. If this is the custom and the congregation is used to it, it may be difficult to change. But the simple reading of the account of the cross from one Gospel has a powerful effect. At the same time, if there is a Good Friday service and there is a desire to use a single Gospel narrative, the lectionary insists on John for all three years. If the denomination permits it, the narrative from other Gospels could be used in some years and therefore give the congregation the experience of more than John. It is interesting that the Passion Sunday Gospel readings do come from a different Gospel each year.

### *Holy Saturday*

Two very different services, complete with lectionary selections, are proposed for Saturday. The most famous, and typical, is the Easter Eve service, the Vigil, which is really an Easter service and therefore will not be discussed here. The other, which is the final part of Lent, includes readings about the burial of Christ. The Old Testament lesson is Job 14:1-14, that asks what happens to those who die, or one can choose a text from Lamentation 3:1-9, 19-24, that is a cry of distress, but also of hope in God's mercy. The Epistle is I Peter 4:1-8, urging Christians to be faithful as Christ was. This is a service that completes the passion account and waits with hope for the word of the Resurrection.