

Lent: A Time to Intensify Our Living into Christ

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The fall of 2008 flung Americans onto an economic roller coaster ride like none other in recent memory. A seven-day plummet in the Dow, a one-day meteoric leap, a dizzying series of dips and rises had American Christians hanging onto their pews for dear life, clinging for some sense of spiritual stability as the raucous midway din of presidential campaign rhetoric assailed their eardrums.

It is impossible for this author to peer into a homiletic crystal ball to discern the precise contexts in which sermons of Lent 2009 will be preached. However, at the writing of this article, prognostications are that the new President and Vice President, whoever they may turn out to be, will have inherited a full plate of economic challenges, a war, and perhaps even additional monumental troubles beside which these former crises pale. In the congregations to which readers of this journal preach, it is entirely possible that jobs will have been lost, retirees' savings and seminary endowments eroded, and church budgets cut.

With anxiety abounding all around and not least in the hearts of us preachers, we are left with no choice but to throw ourselves facedown before the throne of our merciful God, pleading that we will be given the faith and courage to proclaim Good News which

1. keeps the *big picture* of God's love for all in full view. A photograph on the front page of the metro section of a local newspaper etched onto the mind's eyes of readers the searing image of 156 people who queued up on a weekday morning between 4:30 a.m. and 8 a.m. outside a community crisis assistance agency, waiting for the doors to swing open on the possibility of a utility bill paid or a sack of groceries proffered. Whatever Good News a preacher preaches from these Lenten texts must ring as true in the food pantry line as it does in the suburban Bible study group. Perhaps one blessing of an economic downturn is that it offers us the possibility of clearing our vision so that those we have formerly labeled "other" now become fellow passengers in the same boat, as together we are buffeted about by troubled economic waters, our hearts and lives shaken open to receive anew the transforming power of the God whom we know in Jesus Christ.

2. provides gracious *sanctuary* for worried, wearied souls. A few days after Congress passed its economic rescue plan, a banker approached his pastor and confided, "The hour I spend in worship has never been more important to me. The Word that I hear carries me through the turmoil of my week. Especially now, I need to be reminded of a constantly loving God who will never abandon me." The struggles of our congregants are real, and in this reality, pastors are challenged to listen to them and to the Spirit deeply and prayerfully in order that our sermons might bear a non-anxious witness, conveying the peace of Jesus Christ which passes all understanding.

3. is a faithful *prophetic* Word. My colleague Kathy Beach-Verhey bravely prayed recently, "Lord God, this financial crisis highlights our love of and dependence on money, and as people of faith, this helps us to call into question our values and priorities...Loosen our bonds to our money and our material possessions we pray,

Lord God, at the same time that we pray for you to calm our anxious hearts and minds.” The desires of our pastors’ hearts to embrace the hurts of our congregants ought not make us hesitant to speak of their and our complicity in the injustice which the God of the widow and the orphan confronts.

Lent is a time to take the time

to let the power of our faith story take hold of us,
a time to let the events
get up and walk around in us
a time to intensify
our living into Christ....¹

Lent I – Mark 1: 9-15

It was a barren place. The rocks were bare and jagged. Hills of sand dotted the landscape. It was the wilderness. And it was into the wilderness that the Spirit of God hurled Jesus.

Hmmm.... Isn’t the Spirit of God supposed to lead people into lush, sunlit, happy places? Ask any parent what she desires for her children, and she is apt to respond, “Ah, I want them to be happy.” Surely God, the perfect Parent, would want the same for Jesus.

But apparently not.

The Spirit of God may have descended upon Jesus at his baptism, giving him a divine A+, but now the same Spirit gives him a swift hard kick into a place where problems loom large and people feel utterly alone. In Matthew and Luke Jesus is “led” by the Holy Spirit, which conjures up a picture of a dewy-eyed child trustingly placing his hand into the hand of a buxom, grandmotherly Holy Spirit or a trust walk at a youth group meeting. In contrast, Mark writes that the Spirit “drove” Jesus into the wilderness, which brings to mind not a white dove gently fluttering over Jesus’ head, but a huge black raven flapping its wings with tornado-like fury, dive-bombing Jesus and snatching him up in its needle-sharp beak by the tag of his robe and dropping him with a thud into the middle of the desert and a fight-to-the-death battle with the very forces of evil.

Mark paints a picture of the wilderness place where people who are serious about living the Christian faith are of necessity driven. Then he concludes this little narrative by painting a picture of community in verse 13: “Wild animals were [Jesus’] companions, and angels took care of him.” (*The Message*) It is a tiny glimpse of God’s cosmic community, if you will: the animals, the angels, and a human being, Jesus, who represents all human beings, all a part of each other, keeping each other faithful in the midst of the wilderness.

Lent II – Mark 1: 21-28

Note how the gospel writer describes Jesus’ body language. The scene progresses in this way: Jesus teaches. It’s sobering stuff about suffering and rejection and dying, so Peter reacts, wagging a long, bony finger of rebuke under Jesus’ nose.

What happens next is interesting. Mark writes, “But turning and looking at the disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter.” In other words, Jesus swivels around toward the disciples, which may be the gospel writer’s way of swiveling around toward the church

and extending an arm in order to sweep all who are the church into the scene in order to make sure that when Jesus gets to the part about denying oneself and picking up the cross and following, Christians of every age are to know that these words are intended for their ears as well as for those who heard or read them in the first century.

What has often happened, however, is that as Jesus' words have made the journey from the church's ears to Christians' mouths and from Christians' mouths out into the world, they have been spoken in some twisted ways with devastating results. How many times has a woman who is struggling with whether to stay in or leave a situation of spousal abuse been heard to say, "My pastor told me that this is my cross to bear," or "I know that I am supposed to deny myself for the sake of my kids if I am a good Christian, but I don't know how much longer I can take it"?

Whenever Scripture is used, or rather, misused, to keep people in slavery or to manipulate someone into living in any way that is less than whole, we may be assured that "the Son of Man will be ashamed" (v. 38) of those who make the claim that they are his *body*.

Mark 8: 31-38 calls us away from such shame, however. The passage draws us into being the true and faithful Body of Christ, a body which is willing to lay down our very lives for the sake of others.

There is a lot of suffering in the world. And sometimes our hearts break from the weight of our own suffering or the suffering of ones who are near and dear to us. For Christians who seek to follow the vocation of Christ which he elucidates in Mark 8, however, our own suffering is placed within a larger context, a context which is much vaster than simply "us." We are not the only ones in pain, and indeed, when one considers the people who are hungry in the world and compare the lack in their diets to the amount of food that most American Christians have in our pantries and refrigerators and at church potluck dinners, then, at the very least, we are granted some sense of proportion regarding our own suffering.

But Jesus gives us much more than a sense of proportion. He gives us a calling, a vocation which he himself empowers in us, in which the breaking of our own hearts becomes a cross-shaped bridge which connects into the suffering and, ultimately, the healing of others.

Lent III – John 2:13-22

People call the story, "The Cleansing of the Temple."

If we didn't know better, we might conjure up an entirely different scenario involving Windex, Comet, or Pledge upon hearing the title. This story is no quaint domestic scene, however. Here we don't find Jesus engaged in a flurry of light housekeeping activity, but in a mad rampage around the Temple courtyard. In his hands is not a dust cloth, but a whip of cords. He isn't shoving dust bunnies out from under the bookcase, but shoving moneychangers away from their desks. When he has finished with his task of cleansing, the fresh clean scent of lemon oil can't be detected anywhere. The cattle are loose, the doves are squawking, and the people are upset.

The people are mad, but they aren't as mad as Jesus. Jesus is very mad, because the people who are in charge of the Temple have been way too concerned about mere housekeeping. Shaken by the political turmoil of being under Roman rule, the keepers of the Jewish tradition were into survival. They were holding onto their institutions for dear life, contenting themselves with housekeeping matters like changing Roman

coins into shekels and making sure that there was a good selection of sheep and doves for the worshippers.

Into this scene, Jesus thrusts himself. Turning over tables. Upsetting the conventional ways of doing things. Attacking what they understand religion to be. Doing everything he can to move them from a superficial to a deeper, truer understanding of what it means to be rightly related to God.

How is Jesus tearing into your life, confronting you with the robust heartiness of his truth? How is he pulling the rug out from under the communion table of your church and sending the table of your denomination toppling out of the chancel in his anger at how much time is spent on mere housekeeping? How is Jesus turning over the tables of your and your congregation's survival mentality with amazing newness and power?

Lent IV – John 3: 14-21

This passage contains that most-often-taught-in-Sunday School, most-frequently-placarded-at-sporting-events Bible verse, “For God so loved the world...”

Most Christians can quote John 3:16 at the drop of a hat. That's good, for the verse and the story of which it is a part speak eloquently of God's love for the *cosmos*. The Gospel according to John got written down back in the day when Christianity was just getting formed in an organized religion sense. Many for whom it was written still mostly thought of themselves as Jews, but they were Jews who had either stomped out of or gotten kicked out of the traditional synagogue because they believed in Jesus, and they were hurting from the nasty things that the people in the synagogue across the street were saying about them...how they were the kind of people whose kids you couldn't let your kids play with because, you never know, they believed all kinds of weird things, and if you didn't keep a close eye on them, they might just up and serve your kids ham sandwiches when they came inside for a snack or something terrible like that. It hurts to have people feel that way about you, so to hear that they weren't condemned by God like they were condemned by their neighbors, but in fact were loved by God beyond their imagining was a very heartening thing. It was heartening for those first-century folk to hear, and it's been heartening for Christians to hear ever since.

That's the upside of the story. The downside of the story is that when people say nasty things about you, sometimes what you do out of the hurt and anger that you feel is retaliate by saying nasty things right back about them. There is something of this going on in the Nicodemus story. Readers are told that Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night, and that tiny fact—that this respected leader of the Pharisees could no more walk up and ring Jesus' doorbell in broad daylight than the Pope could casually drop in at a Planned Parenthood board meeting for a friendly chat over lunch—is a clue that while Nicodemus hadn't journeyed very far in a physical sense to meet with Jesus, he was, nevertheless, miles outside of his religious comfort zone. This detail about Nicodemus coming to meet Jesus in the dark is also a little retaliatory dig on the part of the narrator. Nicodemus may be a great Jewish leader, but he is “in the dark” (wink, wink) and so, by virtue of association, is everybody else in the evil-deed-doing synagogue across the street.

At the same time that Christians are being heartened by the assurance that God loves the whole cosmos beyond their greatest imagining and Jesus is the supreme

expression of this love, it's important that they be reminded by their preachers where the condemnatory language about people who don't believe in Jesus comes from, so that the story isn't tipped over and the downside becomes the upside²

Lent V – John 12: 20-33

“Sir, we would see Jesus.” These words were inscribed on a small brass plate mounted on the seminary chapel pulpit at the precise spot where they would catch the eye of every student, every professor, every visiting lecturer who stood there to preach. “Sir???!?” sputtered the women students to one another and to any sympathetic and long-suffering male classmates who would listen.

It is a bit amusing for one of those students, now mellowed into middle age, to think back to the 1970's and how uncomfortable that brass plaque made her.

And yet honesty would force her to admit that when nudged by a writing assignment to come face to face with John 12's “Sir, we would see Jesus,” she is still uncomfortable, although for a different reason altogether.

On a plaque on a pulpit, as an admonition to a preacher, the words seem to be implying, “The gospel is simple. Just proclaim it in its purity and simplicity, and people will see Jesus.” However, the gospel is never simple. How do people see Jesus when the news which pounces onto the screen when one logs onto the internet, morning coffee in hand, roars war and economic turmoil? How do people see Jesus while standing at a graveside as the minister intones, “Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” into the emptiness of their grief?

The gospel of Jesus Christ is rarely, if ever, simple, and thus, it is reassuring to read John 12: 20-33 on the Fifth Sunday in Lent. Belief in Jesus did not seem simple in that long-ago day either. Some Greeks approach the disciples, the ones who know Jesus best, and the visitors say, “Sir, we would like to see Jesus.” And you never saw such scurrying around. Do the disciples know who Jesus is or don't they? Are they too embarrassed or unsure or shy to point the way to Jesus with clarity and eloquence? It would seem so.

And there is a voice from heaven. Is it thunder? Or is it an angel? Some of those who were there said one thing. Others who were there said another. Were they really doing their best to hear God's voice, but simply couldn't quite make it out? It would seem so.

And then there is Jesus himself. Even in John's Gospel, where Jesus is more omniscient than he is in the other gospels, Jesus himself owns up to a troubled soul. Is he doubtful? Is he afraid? Yes, it would seem so. And yet, he goes forward to the hour of his own death. And moving forward, he adds an incredibly gracious word for all who doubt, for all who are afraid, for all who find it difficult to believe: “I, when I am lifted up, will draw all peoples to myself.”

Shortly after Joanna Adams became pastor at North Decatur Presbyterian Church, a long-time member and elder, sixty-five years old, first killed his thirty-one year old son and then shot and killed himself. The son had been diagnosed with schizophrenia eight years earlier, had ceased taking his medication, and had become more and more violent. The father had become deeply concerned that his son would hurt someone else.

In the sermon which Joanna Adams preached at the memorial service for the two of them, she said, “The Reformed theologian Karl Barth said that people come to

church on the Sabbath with only one question in their minds: Is it true?...When we come to church on a Monday afternoon for a memorial service of two people who died untimely deaths, the question is even more compelling. Is it true? Can God be trusted on a day like today?"

After forthrightly winding through all the painful questions which such tragedy spawns, Joanna Adams said, "We are not dealing today with a God who comes around only when things are rosy and the birds are singing. There is a cross up there! The God we know in Jesus Christ knows about suffering. The God we know in Jesus Christ gets to the valley of death, gets to loss, to doubt, before we get there, so that He is ready to catch us when we stumble blindly in, so that He can guide us through the dark.... It is true that God can be trusted."³

It is true that Christ draws all people to himself. Whether one finds it easy or difficult to believe, whether the thought of death rarely crosses one's mind or whether one is staring death in the face, Christ is drawing all to himself. Thanks be to God.

Notes

1. Ann Weems, *Kneeling in Jerusalem* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 20.
2. I am indebted to Ronald J. Allen and Clark M. Williamson, *Preaching the Gospels Without Blaming the Jews: A Lectionary Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 29-30, for raising this caution.
3. Joanna Adams, "The Only Question," in *A Chorus of Witnesses*, ed. Thomas G. Long and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 267-270.