

Lenten Preaching in the United States

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I recall hearing a story of a neighboring church, early in my ministry. The pastor had sat the ushers down and said, “If we’re going to grow, we really must be more visitor-friendly. We can’t, for example, show a parent the door when their infant child starts to cry. We must find ways of showing them they’re welcome.” A couple of weeks later precisely such a scenario transpired. A young woman found her baby was making a terrific noise and headed for the door. An usher stood in her way. “I need to leave,” she said. “You can’t,” he replied. She prevailed, but only after she made it clear she was prepared to use force. A ministry of welcome had quickly become one of imprisonment.

A similar face-off takes place twice a year between theologically-subtle pastors and their enthusiastic but liturgically less-nuanced congregations. The first such season is Advent. “It’s Christmas!” blares every store and TV channel from September onwards. Understandably, members of the congregation are excited that the World, so often preoccupied with the flesh and the devil, has, for this season, chosen to embrace a Christian festival, albeit often under the misty haze of “the Holidays.” Armed with festive tree and somewhat kitsch crèche figures, willing congregation members struggle out from Thanksgiving indulgence and announce, “It’s Christmas!” “No it’s xxx not!” insists the self-respecting and (liturgically) perfectly-formed pastor. “What is it then?” “It’s Advent,” says the curmudgeonly pastor, wondering if anyone will ever learn. Thus begins the annual ritual by which the World and the laity celebrate Christmas, but the clergy stubbornly refuse to.

The second such season of pre-festal tension is Lent. Clergy exercise their refined sensibilities by seeking and destroying Alleluias wherever they might casually appear and stamping out the beauty of the lily, should it come anywhere near the sanctuary. More than once I have sat in the planning meeting for the annual Good Friday ecumenical downtown walk of witness and witnessed the dumbfounded members of the Salvation Army fail to comprehend why the inclusion of the unspeakable words “Up from the grave he arose” during the hymn otherwise promisingly entitled “Low in the Grave He Lay” should provoke solemn Anglican brothers and sisters to threaten to withdraw from the whole enterprise. How many clergy have retired knowing that, if they did nothing else for the kingdom, at least they ensured that there were no inappropriate smiles for several weeks after Ash Wednesday.

Like all liturgical seasons, Lent struggles to hold its own amid the rhythms of the secular year. In the US, the great alternative narrative of February and March is Spring Break, honored in suburban congregation and campus ministry since time began with one of the great sacred cows of American Christianity — the mission trip. In the UK, the Fourth Sunday in Lent, officially known as Refreshment Sunday, has, for at least 200 years, been earmarked as Mothering Sunday. Like the May equivalent in the US, this occasions an outpouring of cloying sentimentality, righteous insensitivity toward the childless, single, gay, and orphan, and egregious self-congratulation on the part of otherwise self-denying and unrewarded parents. (One of the greatest mercies of ministry on a college campus was that the Mothers’ Day weekend usually coincided

with Commencement – and thus provided me with an unavoidable prior commitment elsewhere.) But in different ways Spring Break and Mothering Sunday offer a let-up in the otherwise unrelenting moroseness of the Lenten season. In doing so they mark a buffer between the two great themes of Lent: the wilderness and the cross.

Lent begins in earnest with discipline, discipline honed in the wilderness. Ash Wednesday and Lent 1 have all the good intentions and short shelf-life of New Year's resolutions. The only remedy is to begin talking and thinking and praying about Lent some time before it actually begins. In a congregation whose model for growth (aka survival) is to be cheerful and welcoming, upbeat and back-slapping, and altogether a whole lot More Fun Than God, this presents something of a challenge. There's a general sense in the mainline church that sin and repentance are just too, ahem, negative; and that, rather than Lent be about giving something up, it should rather be about taking something on. A quick glance at the waistlines and consumer goods of the average mainline churchgoer might lead one to suppose that a little giving up might not be such a bad idea; but nonetheless the sense that giving things up is "so yesterday" has taken hold. Either way (and surely Lent has to be about both) the conventional Ash Wednesday question, "What are you giving up for Lent?" tends to be met with the answer, "I haven't decided yet." The only way to avoid this is to set aside some time in the season between the end of Epiphany (at Candlemas) and the beginning of Lent to offer some suggestions, shared wisdom, and opportunity for discernment.

The crucial scriptural source for preaching about discipline is Matthew 13:44-46: "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it." Here is the central theme that runs through the two halves of Lent: God, who has everything and can have anything, sells everything and shapes all existence simply to have us. We are that pearl. The incarnation and cross are that selling and its consequence. The question for us is, having seen how willing God is prepared to sell to have us, how will we respond? How readily will we sell in order to have God? Is it possible to have God unless we are prepared to sell everything else? After all, it's not clear that God is able to have us any other way – and perhaps not even then. That is the knife-edge on which salvation rests. So this is the focal theme of Lent, of both discipline and the cross: imitation of the shape of God's life and the direction of God's story.

Without this, the conventional sermon on the temptation narratives that marks the First Sunday in Lent lapses into either moralism or the self-help manual. The Old Testament readings provide richer territory for the ground a Lent 1 sermon usually needs to cover. But many mainline preachers seldom stray from the gospel, and this has a tendency to lead into either the Scylla of exploring our personal temptations to multiply food, jump off temples, and rule the world, or the Charybdis of setting up our petty greed, lust, and pride as some kind of equivalent to God's choice in Christ never to be except to be with us: two equally absurd, but frequently practiced, homiletic directions. The temptation narratives make sense in the light of the parables of the pearl and the treasure: Christ has to renounce many things, even otherwise good things like feeding the hungry and benevolently ruling the world, if he is to have the one thing God's heart is set on. Likewise Lent is a time for setting things aside, even

good things, to desire only God.

How many Lenten disciplines make it through to Holy Week? The pastor never discovers. The wise pastor knows not to dwell too much on the 40 days of Lent, lest the alert church member do the math and want to know why there are more than 40 days in Lent, and, if Sundays are supposed somehow still to be resurrection days when it comes to fasting, why then are we so stringent on those very days about alleluias and glorias and flowers in the sanctuary? And is the liturgical color for Maundy Thursday purple (for Lent), sackcloth (left over from the last vacation bible school), red (for Holy Week), or white (because it is one of the Great Days of the Christian year)? These are conversations from which the pastor finds it hard to become disentangled; the wise pastor resists the temptation to seem too learned on such subjects.

However many or few Lenten disciplines are still upheld a few weeks into the season, the sermons on disciplines seldom survive the first weekend, or at most the second. I don't think I've ever heard a sermon on fasting or self-denial later than that. One positive consequence of this is that Lent has not become the great season of Christian self-help. The six habits of highly-effective disciples—self-examination, prayer, fasting, almsgiving, scripture-reading, and repairing broken relationships—are strongly, and rightly, associated with Lent. But they have never become what Stephen Covey's mantra (be proactive, begin with the end in mind, put first things first, think win-win, seek first to understand, then to be understood, synergize, and sharpen the saw) meant to the business community of the 1990s or the person looking for a technique to turn around their own underachievement.¹ Lurking Pelagianism was and remains the core Protestant suspicion of Catholic piety—yet that has never stopped Protestants having their own version of Pelagian impulses. Lent treads a fine line between an uncomplicated Augustinian conviction that our identity is profoundly perverted (“Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return....”) and a rather more Irenaean understanding that our chief problem is ignorance, sloth, and immaturity—and thus that a good bit of spiritual square-bashing would do us very well. It wouldn't be hard for a congregation to take away a somewhat mixed message from the sermons and liturgy of the early weeks of Lent: the preacher does well to identify which of the two messages to make the main focus. Given that the rest of the world tends to stereotype the United States as an Irenaean culture—one that sees adversity as a problem waiting to be fixed, rather than a mystery to be lived with—it's commendable that Lenten disciplines have seldom been customized into a self-help strategy. (Although perhaps such a strategy, and the appetite for it, accounts for the appeal of Rick Warren's *A Purpose Driven Life*.)

There's no use castigating such a phenomenon (certainly not in the course of a sermon) as if Pelagius didn't have a point—and Irenaeus an even better one. A gospel that simply exchanges humanity's miserable sin via Christ's unmerited grace for God's unutterable glory misses out on the texture, goodness, variety, and depth of human life and experience. It also undersells the church and leaves the Holy Spirit little to do. The church is not just a hospital for sinners; it's also a school for saints. Justification is half the gospel; sanctification is the other half. Sanctification is what these early weeks of Lent are about, and distinguishing sanctification from Pelagianism is at the heart of the preacher's task. The point that must not be lost is that virtue fundamentally means power: a church whose members speak the truth, love one another, witness in the face of fear, and share their belongings constitutes

a social and political force like no other—a genuine light to the nations. The problem with mainline preaching in the early weeks of Lent is not so much that it is too Pelagian, but that it is too domestic, too pious, too focused on the personal journey into the wilderness and not sufficiently mindful of the social and political power of a community shaped by a common programme of virtue, a community looking to embody a shared set of practices, a community aware of the significance of common witness. Jesus went into the wilderness because *that is where Israel had learned who it was, what it was made of, where its support came from, and where it was going*. Jesus went into the wilderness as the embodiment of Israel to learn the same things about himself. The church marks Lent to discover in whose strength it stands. If there is ever to be a congregation retreat or weekend away, this surely is the right time in the liturgical year to do it.

So that's what the majority of Lent is about: sanctification—working out our salvation with fear and trembling. But towards Passiontide, Lent changes gear. It becomes less about what God in Christ gave up for us and for our salvation and more about what Jesus took up for our sake: namely, the cross. Yet if the first tendency of mainline preaching in Lent is to domesticate discipline, the second is never quite to get to the cross.

This is for a number of reasons. Mainline Protestants are wedged between Catholics, who explore the cross in exhaustive detail, from every possible angle, one lingering station at a time, pausing lengthily each day of Holy Week and going without sleep from the mass of Maundy Thursday to the Easter Vigil; and evangelicals, for whom every day is justification day, the resurrection is little more than a validation of the cross, Christmas and indeed the gospels are no more than a prologue to Calvary, and there's nothing especially to celebrate on Good Friday that differs from what is celebrated every time Christians gather to pray. (I perhaps exaggerate the two poles a little.) The point to grasp is this: the liturgical year assumes a prominent role for Holy Week. This is when the central drama of the Christian imagination is enacted and imbibed. If lay people were not going to be active participants in this drama on the days leading up to and including Good Friday, then the whole liturgical year would need to be reshaped—with a much greater emphasis on the cross at other times of year and certainly on the Sundays of Lent. Mainline churches find themselves with the bathwater of the Catholic liturgical year, yet without the baby of pious Holy Week devotion; and the result is, never quite getting to the cross. (In the UK the problem is exacerbated because the Easter weekend is always a public holiday on the Friday and Monday and almost always coincides with children's school break and college vacation—so even the most regular churchgoer is sorely tempted to head out for a four-day sojourn far from the madding crowd.) It's hard to lament this on a crowded Easter morning (the gathering of around 4,500 at Duke Chapel's services each Easter Day—leaving aside the 2,500 gathered for Catholic mass—is an indelible mark on my memory of ministry in North Carolina); but there's always a lingering sense of turning up for the gain without entering into the pain—which rather bears out H. Richard Niebuhr's celebrated criticism of mainline religion and its early twentieth-century social gospel in the United States.² The American mainline has been extraordinarily successful in folding the pattern of Sunday morning worship into the culture of the whole nation. The downside is that it is difficult to make any other time of the week meet the same purpose—even once a year, to mark the salvation of all creation.

What then is to be done? I have never understood the relatively recent Roman Catholic move to combine Passion and Palm Sunday into one on the Sunday before Easter. The Fifth Sunday of Lent—what used to be Passion Sunday—is in many ways the ideal day on which to set up Passiontide by preaching the cross on a broad canvas. The RCL readings for the day—notably John 11—offer a suitable invitation to do so. At this stage Lent gets a second wind, somewhat akin to what tennis commentators call the “business end of the set,” when the score nears the tiebreak. This is a somewhat arbitrary day to preach on the doctrine of justification, but a very appropriate day to meditate upon Isaac Watts’ “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” or to consider the two natures of the crucified Lord.

The most complex, and in many respects the most textured, Sunday of the liturgical year is Palm Sunday. Almost every Palm Sunday I can remember over my time as a pastor, I have approached Palm Sunday without great anticipation and left feeling moved and challenged and deeply satisfied—the service somehow exceeding the sum of its parts. At Duke Chapel, for the last four or five years I was there, an actor-pastor named McKennon Shea offered a single-voice enacted passion narrative, from Judas’ betrayal to the deposition, beginning with the clink of traducing coins and concluding with the thud of rock closing over the tomb. Each year he performed it there was more to perceive, more to discover, more to ponder. A year or two ago I was with a dozen laypeople at dinner and took the opportunity to say, “I wonder if you could tell us about one sermon that still rings in your imagination long after you heard it.” Members of the party reminisced about poignant words from childhood or challenging words from student days. But one person, even though she knew it didn’t “count,” chose Rev. Shea’s enacted gospel. “That shows me who Jesus is more than any sermon ever has,” she said.

In a Lent that lasts longer than the concentration span of the average congregation, in a lay culture that finds it hard or uncongenial to focus its whole year around the triduum, in a spiritual climate that has come to regard the cross as a transitional object, Palm Sunday emerges as the pivotal day of the whole season. It’s a crowded day—palms for everybody, maybe a procession, possibly even a donkey, perhaps a passion narrative—and in many ways the most challenging Sunday of the year for the preacher. But the most promising, too. For it encompasses both the joy of Easter and the horror of Good Friday; both the grand stage of world history and the intimacy of the disciples’ failure; both the humanity of Jesus as king and the divinity of Jesus as Lord. Perhaps most significantly in the light of what we earlier saw as the tendency of mainline Christianity to domesticate discipline and spiritualize the cross, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem—the main focus of the Palm Sunday celebration—is a thoroughly public, political, visible occasion.

As my dinner companion’s judgment demonstrates, if the Palm Sunday liturgy is conducted to its full potential, the role of the sermon is not quite so critical. (Of course this is true of every act of worship.) But as the power of the enacted passion makes clear, the heart of Lent—and most certainly of preaching in Lent—is to enable the listener to enter the story. The gospels are in narrative form for a reason. The preacher’s role is not to *tell* the story, but to bring to bear on the listener its telling moments, make the listener sense its compelling power and draw out its existential implications. Palm Sunday, as much as any moment in the liturgical year, is where justification and sanctification meet. Palm Sunday is the music played on a violin

string stretched between heaven and earth, where the truth of our horror meets the wonder of God's glory. The members of the congregation may be able and willing to join the throng through Holy Week, or they may not; regardless, Palm Sunday, in liturgy and sermon, should give them a flavor of the whole week.

One thing more remains to be said about preaching in Lent. The number 40 is, at root, derived from the number of years Israel spent in the wilderness after crossing the Red Sea. This is, perhaps, the definitive condition the preacher assumes in the listener: that is, "I know I'm supposed to be saved—but I don't feel like it; and things aren't turning out quite the way I hoped they would." When people speak about their faith, they seldom highlight moments of ecstasy or certainty; much more often they identify moments in the wilderness when they discovered God was with them after all, or retrospective discoveries that they couldn't have found or recognized the Promised Land had the wilderness not lain in their way. Of course the preacher wants to declare the leaving-behind of Egypt; of course the preacher wants to announce the joy of the Promised Land. But simply to do so risks losing touch with the faith experience of the congregation. If by contrast the preacher can make sense of the wilderness without cliché, banality, or superficial comfort, then the gospel has truly done its work.

For this is preaching: to encapsulate the wilderness; to help the congregation find in it the way of the cross; to inspire the listener with the compelling story of Christ's journey to Calvary, such that this wondrous story puts all other stories in the shade, and one's own in perspective; and to move believers to let the Holy Spirit shape their lives around disciplines that reflect the way God's life has been shaped around loving them. This is the Lenten journey: not hopelessly to seek discipline in the wilderness; not simply to slip from the wilderness to the cross; but in the wilderness to find the way of the cross, and from the hill of the cross to see the reason for discipline. Is there a genuine Christian route to discipline any other way?

Notes

1 Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: The Free Press, 2004), originally published in 1990.

2 "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross." H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 193.