

Preaching the Lenten Texts

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Ash Wednesday

Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 51:1-17; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Lent is tricky for preachers. Of course, there's no puzzle greater than the cross, which means Lent ends in the trickiest territory of all. But, deft preaching is required right from the start, with Jesus admonishing any who would follow him, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them" and then our imposing upon our parishioners and ourselves ashen crosses drawn on foreheads, one of the most publicly pious acts of the liturgical year. How do we square these two things?

It isn't difficult to discern the theme of these texts: they all concern themselves with right worship according to God, "right" being the sort of worship that informs the way people live. Isaiah, anticipating restoration in the land following the exile, means for the people to get it right this time, asking of them on behalf of the Lord, "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?" As for the psalm, it covers a lot of ground, but this is one patch of it, "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." Jesus, for his part, preaches even less overt religion—that those who give alms ought to do it "in secret," that those who pray ought to do it "in secret," and that those who fast should put on a brave face for it, washed and oiled so other people think it's just a normal day.

There may be some comfort in knowing that the tension between public piety and true worship is less tense these days. After all, the degree to which worshipping in secret and a forehead smeared with ash lie in contrast depends upon the larger culture into which we each go following worship. And things have changed. There was a time (or so I'm told) when people could gain respect, even authority, by being known as "church people." Really, once this was shorthand for declaring someone of good character. (I remember the self-serious Muppet, Sam the American Eagle, introducing the musical duo, also Muppets, Wayne and Wanda like this: "Besides being tremendous singers, they're church people.") In such a milieu, you could wear a black cross on your forehead not as mark of humility or mortality or even shame, but as a badge of honor. Jesus would have us be wary of this.

Good thing for us, then, that this is considerably less the case these days—or at least is less so where I live in New England and among my generation "X." No one that I know considers going to church a way to rise in social standing. On the contrary, most people in this demographic feel a need to explain or even defend their quaint habits, should they even have them, and most don't. For them, indeed for us, a smudgy black forehead is cause for more discomfiting conclusions than that we're admirable, like that we're ignorant fools or self-righteous jerks or that we simply don't know how to wash our faces in the morning.

But none of this sort of notice ought to concern us (though it might). No, what

should concern us, what should concern any who will set out on a regular old Wednesday after having ashes imposed, is that people's notice of this might then set their expectations as to how we should live: Christian, rise, and act your creed! Being a Christian is impossible—except by grace. Following Christ is impossible—except by grace. For any of us who would go where Christ leads, the journey will prove impossible, asymptotic. This is the paradox built into the call of the Lord; this is the paradox essential to the call of the gospel. For some, this paradox will be cause for giving up; why bother attempting something that will always best you? For others, a few others, that paradox will be life itself—the truth that gives life its form, shape, and direction.

At no other time in the Christian liturgical year is this paradox laid out more plainly than during Lent, when we follow Christ to the cross because here we find hope when we pray to take on the cross ourselves because by this we truly live. And on no other day will our folly in the faith be more apparent to the world than when we each wear the ashen cross. By it, we are condemned. For it, we rise.

First Sunday in Lent

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

How many sermons have you heard that take the serpent at his word? How many sermons have you *preached* that assume the serpent to be speaking truth? I'll tell if you will. The serpent in the garden and the devil in the wilderness don't share a name, don't share a form; many a scholar would caution us against making too direct an equivalence here. But they do use the same technique—suggestion, and that counts for something.

The serpent asked the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any fruit in the garden?'" This question is ambiguous, I imagine by design. Consider, did the serpent mean to ask, "Did God say that of all the trees here in this garden, are there any from which you may not eat?" In this case God can be felt as gracious, having offered the man and woman a great abundance, everything here but one. Or did the serpent mean to ask, "Did God say not to eat from any tree in this garden?" In this case God would be felt as withholding, even cruel, a tempter himself, laying out an abundance and then saying, "Don't touch." The woman's response might be seen as her attempt to hold on to God as good: "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden, but not of the fruit that is in the middle of the garden." But the suggestion otherwise now hangs in the air.

So it might have been in the wilderness. Once again, temptation comes by suggestion: "If you are the Son of God," the devil is said to have said, though Jesus had not claimed such a thing for himself. But now, there it is, something Jesus might now indeed want, to be thought of as the Son of God! Will he defend it? Will he work to prove it? Not at first, and not again, as twice the devil is said to repeat this pattern. Finally, the devil, perhaps frustrated with subtlety, goes with the straightforward: "All these—the kingdoms of the world—I will give you, if you fall down and worship me." Yet by this point the jig was up, and the hook was empty. Jesus was suggestible to no one but his Father. Not so for nearly everyone else.

The serpent told the woman that God didn't want the man and woman to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because if they did so, "your eyes will be opened and you will be like God," the suggestion being that God doesn't want human

beings to be like God. And so comes the sermon: the man and the woman should have been content in their humanity, shouldn't have striven for divinity, and as for them, so for us.

But, if God doesn't want us to be like God, then why would God have sent us Jesus? If God doesn't want us to live fully into our resemblance to God, then why would God have sent us God's Son who so perfectly imitated God and said also to us, "Follow me," completely embodying God's self-giving love and also inviting us, "Come and see," assuring us, "I am the Way"? If God doesn't want us to be like God, then why would God have sent us God's Holy Spirit by which we might come together as the Church to be formed, informed, reformed, transformed into the mystical body of Christ? Truly, if God didn't want us to be like God and yet sent God's Son to stimulate in us such mimetic desire and God's Spirit that this desire might be fulfilled, then God is more tempter than the serpent, the devil.

Consider, God would only have a problem with our becoming like God if God were certain things that we know, through Christ, God not to be. God wouldn't want us to be like God if God were all about control, for there can be only one force in control. But God isn't about control: God is about freedom. God wouldn't want us to be like God if God were powerful as the world understands power, for such power secures itself against all who want in on that action. But God isn't about the power that seeks domination: God is about power as expressed in service and self-giving. God, *this* God who is love, who sent His Son to be our shepherd and His Holy Spirit to empower the Church, of course God wants us to be like God!

And yet there is this prohibition, "Of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat. . . ." So perhaps what God didn't want was for us to suffer, to know not only good but evil as well. Or perhaps what God didn't want was for us to attempt to distinguish between these two, good and evil, a process of judgment we so often get woefully wrong. The prohibition could be about any number of things. I just don't think it's about what the serpent suggested it was about.

The resistance to suggestion is holy work. Moreover, it's work we'll do on a daily basis, as will the people for whom we preach. Almost every communication between people comes with some measure of suggestion; so much interaction in our "jus' sayin'" culture is barbed with hooks by which we might get hooked. Our Lenten journey has as its aim the cross of self-giving love and has as our guide Jesus Christ. We set our vision on this aim, we walk in mimesis with our guide, and we take this first step.

Second Sunday in Lent

Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; John 3:1-17

All the readings for this Sunday witness God at work. In Genesis, God, while calling Abraham, has little to say about what Abraham will do and much to say about what God will do. As for the psalmist, all he does is lift his eyes to the hills while the Lord acts in helping and keeping. The story of Nicodemus is more oblique on this matter, but the way in which it has come to be understood casts it in contrast with the assurance that God is the principal actor in life.

To be born again has become a prescription, a commandment. To some Christians, this is *the* prescription, *the* commandment, *the* thing you must do in order to be saved: you must be born again. Often aggressively prescribed, coercively commanded, to

be born again, though an invitation, an appeal, has come to attract mainly those for whom Christianity is a competitive sport and who esteem themselves as winning.

But notice, Jesus himself wasn't so strict with this prescription. First of all, he spoke this only to one person and not to every person who ever approached him wondering how to enter or inherit or abide in the Kingdom of Heaven, and there were many! Second, he spoke in several different terms of this phenomenon — born anew, born from above, born of the Spirit — suggesting that this isn't so literal after all. But most compelling is the fact that what we're "to do" is actually something that is to be done to us.

The middle voice isn't really an option that we as speakers of modern English have. When we speak of ourselves at work in the world, we really have only two choices. The active voice is preferred, and rightly so. Clearer, more direct, the active voice presupposes that a subject can act upon an object and have a direct effect. This is the voice of self-sufficiency and personal responsibility; this is the voice of science with its repeatable results; this is capitalism with its self-made man, and this is democracy with its citizen-activists.

The passive voice is our other choice, but we tend to avoid it, and not only because we've been taught to, but also because it's uninteresting and obfuscating. This is the voice of public figures when forced to admit that mistakes were made, affairs were had, and, if people were hurt or an offense was caused, then an apology is offered.

The middle voice as a third option is all but lost to us, and what a loss it is. Though a prominent feature in many languages, including Biblical Hebrew and Greek, the middle voice comes to us as vestigial. Think "the bread is baking in the oven" — the middle voice conceives of its subject as one participant in some larger, on-going action whose principal actor (the baker) might go unnamed, unrecognized. Thus, it can hold its subjects as responsible for action (or inaction), but not wholly in control of outcome. This is the voice of interrelatedness and multi-causality. Equal parts commandment and confirmation, prescription and proclamation, this is the voice of faith.

Being born, whether the first time or anew, is an activity that can only be rightly understood as happening in the middle voice, an event that depends upon our participation but can hardly be said to be ours alone to have achieved. Really, none of us would brag about our having been born, so why should having been born again be a point of pride or self-righteousness? No, this, which Jesus said, "You must be born anew, born from above, born of the Spirit," he said simply because it's true: this is something that must happen to us. What's more, this is something that *is* happening to us. After all, before we can even hope, fulfillment is already coming.

I often ask my congregation whether, when they tell a story from their lives, they're the principal actor in it. As for me, the older I get and the more practiced I get in this faith and the more familiar I get with the scriptural witness, the more I realize I am a bit player. I decide, I act, but always within a grand narrative that is good only by God's catholic grace. The Holy Spirit blows where it chooses. What's mine to do, what's *ours* to do, is to pray that we each might move with it, leading as it does from life to life.

Third Sunday in Lent

John 4:5-42

This well was contested territory. The women of the village were likely the ones most to use it; fetching the day's water would have been women's work. Also likely, they did so first thing in the morning when it was still cool; lugging water was hard enough work without doing it in the heat of the day. Also likely, they did so as a group, to help each other, to keep company with each other. Really, this well was likely akin to today's office water cooler, with all its social dynamics, ripe and fraught.

Contested territory: the woman alone at the well in the heat of the day had lost. This has me feeling for her. This has me assuming Christ likewise felt for her. Indeed, there's scriptural evidence for this; Jesus shared with her the longest conversation he's remembered to have shared with anyone, even though she was a woman and he a man, even though she was a Samaritan and he a Jew.

Certainly my preaching has focused on this, on her individual suffering of collective scorn, and on Jesus seeing past this and on how freeing she found this and how seeing she became because of this. One of the earliest preachers of the gospel, this woman would go on to proclaim to her countrymen, "Come and see!" and they would indeed leave their city to come, to see.

But the well was contested territory in the more conventional sense, too. Though in Samaria, it was yet Jacob's Well—Jacob whom both the Samaritans and the Jews claimed as a patriarch. But in the centuries since Jacob had met Rebecca there, the people of the region—Judeans, Israelites, Samaritans—differed over where was the rightful place for worship of the Lord whom Jacob had handed down to them all. Those in the south claimed it was Jerusalem, while those in north claimed it was Mount Gerizim and furthermore that leaders of the Jews had edited the Torah to minimize the importance of Gerizim, to emphasize the importance of Jerusalem. It was a journey through history that left the Samaritans to feel themselves as second-class citizens even in their own territory.

Then came the Babylonian invasion which resulted in the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, and the deportation of the most powerful and important Jews while left behind were those deemed of little value, namely the Samaritans. Yet by this slight, they were left to drink of the well, of *this* well. By historical irony, this treasured well was now all theirs...until after the fall of Babylon, when many of those deported returned to their homeland, returned to their higher status, and so cast low once again those who'd been there all along, namely the Samaritans. But this the Samaritans still had, secure within their territory: the well, *this* well.

When the woman at the well spoke to Jesus of "our ancestor Jacob, who gave us this well," it isn't clear whom she meant to include in "our" and among "us." Was she casting "us" as a narrow, tribal group or was she drawing a wider circle, a much wider circle? It was perhaps unclear even to her, the circle widening, widening even as she spoke. What if we're all "us"? No "them" implied, what if no one is here but "us"?

If she'd begun to imagine it thus, it was indeed a change for her. After all, her first words to Jesus were tribal: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" Moreover, if she'd begun to see it thus, then she was close indeed to drinking of the living water. The living water of which Jesus spoke, as distinct from

the water of this well, has something to do with the day that was coming when those who worship on Mount Gerizim and those who worship in Jerusalem would come instead to worship the Father wherever they stood, wherever we stand. This is water that slakes thirst, slakes desire in an absolute and pacifying sense—no more need, no more grasping, no more contests as to who gets what.

Not so for the water of other wells, even *this* well. No, those who come to this well today will yet need water again tomorrow and will come to this well because they have claim to it, will moreover come in order to continue in their claim to it. The water of this well will never completely fulfill such need. To drink water of contested territory is to live in a world defined by rivalry and violence. To drink of the living water is to live in the Kingdom of God where “us” is all there is. The gospel universalizes; the gospel totalizes. The cross is the means of this work. The difference between this and every attempt at totality that the world has ever made is that the cross is a means not of taking by force, but of attracting by grace and self-giving love that all may be one.

Fourth Sunday in Lent

John 9:1-41

The question of who is “us” continues with this story on this Sunday, charged to an even higher degree. But before we get to that, we need to begin in the beginning. This is, indeed, where “John” begins his gospel; like the Bible itself, this narrative begins in the beginning. Yet John’s beginning is different from that in Genesis, different in two key ways. One is that Christ is imagined to have been in the beginning with God at work in creating. The other is that God never came to rest as “on the seventh day” according to Genesis—this because God’s creative work according to John didn’t come to completion, indeed hasn’t even now come to completion but in Christ.

Now to this healing, Jesus and the once-blind man—three points of not-obvious significance. Jesus spat on the ground and made mud, the very stuff of which “Adam” in the beginning was made—*adam* (“man”) and *adamah* (“dust of the ground”) sharing the same Hebrew root. Jesus did so to rub this on the man’s unseeing eyes, a gesture by which this incomplete bit of creation was made now complete. God’s creative work is yet to be done, and this is the work Jesus was sent to do, the work that he claimed was as food to him—doing the will of his Father in completing, perfecting the creation.

This is what he meant when he claimed that this man was born blind not because of sin but so that “God’s works might be revealed through him.” God is yet creating; Christ is yet with God creating. The man born blind wasn’t so because he was sinful or because his parents were sinful, but because the creation is yet incomplete, yet imperfect.

Finally, this is the significance of Christ doing this creative work of completion on the Sabbath, working the works of him who sent Christ rather than resting as if the work were already complete. Rest will come with the end. As of now, as long as Christ is in the world, Christ will be the light of the world, bringing light to those who had been blind, which will in turn blind those who had esteemed themselves as seeing.

As such people, the Pharisees took issue with what had happened, took issue

with the once-blind man's parents, then took issue with the once-blind man himself. But the moment when they decided about him, decided to drive him out, had less to do with Jesus violating the Sabbath or performing signs that were outside the established authorities, had less to do with the once-blind man's clearly having undergone something miraculous but having no ability now to explain it in terms of how or who or why, and had apparently everything to do with when the once-blind man said this of himself and the Pharisees: "we."

Up to that point in the story, the once-blind man had been singled out. People spoke of him, "he." They spoke to him, "you." Others in the story operated as "we"—the neighbors, the Pharisees, even the man's parents. The once-blind man is alone in conceiving of himself as "I," alone, that is, except for Jesus. Most notably, he once even said as Jesus had often said, "*Ego eimi*," that is, "I am." When everyone around him, confused and confusing each other, was asking who it was that Jesus had healed, the now-seeing man declared, "*Ego eimi*," of himself.

Once, though, he joined himself with a group. In speaking to the Pharisees, he had this to say: "This is an astonishing thing! ... We know that God does not listen to sinners...." And it's this that had the Pharisees finally acting decisively in his regard, cutting him out of the "we" that he had just grafted himself into, peeling him off from them since he could only corrupt them by association: "*You* were born entirely in sins, and are *you* trying to teach *us*?" And at that, they "drove him out."

The gospel universalizes; the gospel, as I said, totalizes. The gospel also, paradoxically, individuates. We each must stand alone before God. *Ego eimi*, that is, "I am" the one whom the gospel calls. Jesus worked to dissipate crowds; indeed he was crucified at the hands of a mob, but upon hearing word that the Pharisees had driven the now-seeing man out, he went in search of him, one outcast picking up another outcast.

The Church: a herd of strays claimed by Christ.

Søren Kierkegaard suspected that most people are less afraid of being wrong in their convictions than of standing alone in their convictions. If this is true (and I think it is), then here is a central challenge in the Christian life. We gather together, yes, but we are to be capable also of standing alone.

Fifth Sunday of Lent John 11:1-45

Lent has caught in its net the psychological (in that we each resist suggestion), the spiritual (in our need to be born anew), the political (in our abiding in no-longer contested territory), and the individual (in our being capable of standing alone). We've covered a lot of ground. Indeed, we have come and seen.

John's gospel should come with a decoder ring. There are words and phrases herein that read like code, and nearly all of them are put to use in this passage of Lazarus raised and Christ now hunted. One for the decoder ring is "glorified," used in John not as in the other gospels to imagine Jesus seated at the right hand of the Father, but to indicate him raised on the cross crucified. It may seem a strange or even deranged meaning until we recognize our writer (or writers, as this gospel may have had several) meant for those who follow Christ to find glory not in things such as wealth, power, beauty, might, but in self-emptying service, in *kenosis*. Nowhere is *kenosis* more absolutely displayed than in Christ on the cross. And only by *kenosis*

will the world be saved.

A second one for the decoder ring is “stay,” in Greek *meno*. This is also rendered “abide,” “dwell,” “endure,” “remain”; and it frequently indicates Jesus as “staying,” “abiding,” “dwelling” in the Father, as the Father does in Jesus. According to this gospel, Jesus is God-like, and God is Jesus-like—this because of mutual *menein*.

Finally, there is this phrase: “Come and see.” Jesus first spoke it to the two disciples who had been following John but who switched to following Jesus when John declared of him, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” Those two disciples then asked of Jesus, “Where are you staying?” which is an odd question to follow John’s also quite odd declaration—odd until we hear it in these terms: “Where are you abiding?” or “What are you all about?”

“Come and see,” was Jesus’ response.

The next time we hear it, it comes from Philip when, having come to follow Jesus himself, he’d now invite Nathanael to join: “Come and see.”

This is the call that the woman at the well would issue to her countrymen: “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”

And then at last there is this, Mary and Martha leading Jesus to Lazarus’ grave. He had asked them, “Where have you laid him?” and they answered, “Come and see.” And at this, Jesus began to weep. Why? When word had come to Jesus that Lazarus was sick unto death, Jesus knew, “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” In other words, Jesus knew that to go to Lazarus and to make him rise would be to hand himself over to death.

And when he then, though loving Martha and her sister and Lazarus, “stayed two days longer in the place where he was,” he wasn’t dilly-dallying; he was praying; he was staying, abiding with God. So often we suppose that Jesus’ delay resulted in Lazarus’ death. But properly heard, it becomes clear that, on the contrary, Jesus’ delay enabled Lazarus’ rise.

By God’s abiding in Jesus and Jesus’ abiding in God, Jesus was able to do the work of the Father—which in this case was not only performing a miraculous resurrection, but also performing miraculous *kenosis*. It takes prayer to empty yourself of survival-at-all-cost. It takes prayer to put yourself in harm’s way for another’s sake.¹ It takes abiding in God even if you’re the Christ, to ready yourself to face untruth, torture, and death. Indeed, this is perhaps what makes the Christ the Christ—patiently abiding in God rather than running off at every request to save the world, every suggestion that he could and should.

The gospel of John doesn’t imagine Jesus in Gethsemane. Unlike the synoptic gospels, John’s gospel never imagines Jesus in prayer, distressed and anguished, while the disciples sleep not far away. The raising of Lazarus is John’s imagining this; the raising of Lazarus is Jesus’ moment of waking to what time it is while others sleep and dream.

“Come and see,” Mary and Martha said to Jesus, and Jesus began to weep because his invitation had now returned to him. What others were to come and see—namely, the truth that to live in God’s glory is to give yourself to the cross—Jesus was now asked to come and see. The word he’d first spoken, the call he’d long ago issued, had come now back to itself. Jesus’ ministry had come full circle. Now it was time

for it to be finished. So he wept. Worse, he did so alone. No one there recognized what Lazarus' rise would cost him.

The Church is called to such recognition. Yet we are also released, forgiven, from such a weighty responsibility. We send Christ on to do what we mostly cannot. God go with him.

Palm Sunday

Matthew 21:1-11

Every year about the sixth Sunday of Lent, the question arises as to whether to observe Palm Sunday or Passion Sunday. For some congregations, the matter is long settled: Palm Sunday is a tradition not to be messed with. But these days, as fewer and fewer people observe Holy Week or even just Good Friday, moving from Palm Sunday to Easter feels like an easy skip from a good time to a better one. For this, I often choose the Liturgy of the Passion. It just doesn't seem right to leave out of worship Jesus' trial and crucifixion.

Year A, however, has the events of Holy Week start early. The raising of Lazarus jump-starts Jesus' passion; Jesus' weeping is as the first nail. For this, Year A presents the opportunity of having it both ways, the triumphal entry without ignoring the cross.

That said, I confess I find the scene of Jesus coming into Jerusalem thin stuff to make a sermon out of. (Another reason not to do it every year!) I take it as street theater, provocative and, according to Matthew, fulfilling of prophecy, but at the end of the day insignificant. Its details are worthy of exploring and explaining, but taken whole, nothing new is revealed and nothing old is called into question.

Yet, here's something this story does do: it brings us into real time with Jesus in his final week as a man in the world, and so this is something our preaching on Palm Sunday might do—initiate our parishioners to walk with Jesus through this week. Of course, this is an invitation implied every time we preach. This week, though, we might issue it outright. We might even provide a framework for following him, either in daily worship or in devotions at home.

What lies ahead is heated and pressurized. Old adversaries will yet test Jesus; new ones will team up to come at him from all sides. As for Jesus, his parables will become more pointed and his behavior more provocative, but never at cost to anyone but himself.

Read the story from the outside and the crucifixion might be felt as cathartic, a release of the pressure, a letting off of the steam, tragic, yes, but cleansing, too. Read the story while walking at Jesus' side though, and the crucifixion can only be felt as absurd—killing an innocent in order to break the fever and rising fury. Truly, whatever catharsis the powers-that-be might have hoped this would bring will be supplanted. In its place will be peace by means of a life that continues to live and a God whose nature is to love and forgive.

Have a blessed Lent, my fellow preachers. May it prepare the way for Easter in all its fullness and grace.

Note

1 Antoinette Tuff, the school administrator who talked a would-be school shooter out of doing the deed, fills my thoughts as I write this. Resonating particularly is Stephanie Paulsell's article about her: "Emergency Prayer," in the October 2, 2013 "Faith Matters" of *The Christian Century*.