

Preaching the Lenten Texts 2021: Hope for the Covenant Community

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Introduction

We began our conversation about this article in the summer of 2020. We did so realizing fully that the church and world at the time of this writing are apt to look quite different in the Spring of 2021. As we write, the world is in the midst of a global pandemic that grows more ominous with each passing news cycle; the unemployment rate is at record highs; the body politic is locked in a bitter election cycle; wildfires are out of control on much of the West coast; the Black Lives Matter movement is gathering momentum amid bitter protests that, while mostly peaceful, sometimes erupts into violence; international allegiances are shifting; and much of the world is either food insecure or starving, even as wars and rumors of wars rage; and the church as we know it is unable to gather and is mostly worshipping remotely. How much any or all of this has changed by the time Lent rolls around is not clear. Of this, however, we are certain: for Lent 2021 it will be even more incumbent than usual for the community of faith, drawn together in covenant with the eternal Christ, to call itself collectively, its members individually, and its world to be self-reflective at new depths as we move into the promise and hope of Easter.

We note that of the five Old Testament lessons suggested for the season, four of them deal explicitly with some aspect of living in covenant with God, and the fifth (Nb 21:4-9) deals with God's covenant people living and discovering hope in the midst of crisis. We are, therefore, suggesting that pastors who will be preaching and leading worship in Lent 2021 consider using the concept/s of covenant as a unifying theme throughout the season. Moreover, we are suggesting that preaching and worship during the season consciously and deliberately move toward the promise of a new covenant written on the hearts of believers as promised in the Jeremiah text (31:31-34). Finally, we suggest that the rich variety of recommended readings from the psalms, the epistles, and the gospels be used to inform, broaden, and enlighten what it means for the people of God to live in and into a covenant relationship to the eternal Christ as we move into a prophetic and pastoral mission in a deeply troubled world.

Lent 1

Historically, Lent was a time of catechesis for the church, especially for disciples who would be baptized on Easter. The gospel lesson for the first Sunday of Lent each year tells the story of Jesus being driven into the wilderness. Mark's wilderness story, though, is painfully short compared to other gospels. The telling is so succinct; the reading includes both Jesus' baptism and his temptation in the wilderness. Having both these events in view at once is a gift that may prompt us to reflect on the meaning of our baptism in light of our wilderness experiences in faith and life. The journey of faith that begins in baptism, and a baptismal vocation faithfully pursued, will take us through the wilderness. Like Jesus we will experience testing and, mercifully, God's

providential care. The Psalm for the day pairs with the gospel reading, and if it is not read on its own, it would serve well as the basis for a prayer of confession.

The Old Testament readings in this season also offer an excellent catechetical opportunity because they give us the opportunity to place the death and resurrection of Christ in the broad frame of covenantal theology. It's for that reason we suggest following the Hebrew scripture lessons each week as a thematic series for this season. This week we read the Noahic covenant, though the story of the ark and flood is all in the background, and the text includes only the promise God makes when the waters have receded and the earth is ready for a fresh start.

Four times in this brief passage we hear the parties to the covenant named. They are God, humanity, and the earth. Very importantly, this covenant is between God, Noah and all Noah's descendants, and *every living creature*, an inclusion that is unique in Hebrew covenants. In a time when the effects of climate change are becoming more apparent, when the daily impact on the earth and human society is becoming more significant, and when scientists are increasingly pessimistic about our ability to slow the rise in the earth's temperature, the preacher may well linger here. What does it mean for the earth to be a recipient of God's covenant promise and grace? Moreover, what does it mean for humankind to be joined in solidarity before God with every other living creature?

The sign of this covenant, the reminder of God's promise, is painted on nearly every church nursery wall: a rainbow. The rainbow inspires wonder and delight when it hangs in the sky, but its meaning here is more likely rooted in the warfare of a bow and arrow. God has hung up God's *bow*. God has put the weapons away, and God seems almost sorry for the flood. Never again will God attempt to redeem creation by destroying it. If the preacher lingers here, this covenant could be a call to imaginative peacemaking. If we forsake violence as the means to worthy ends, what bows do we need to hang up? By turning from violence in this covenant, God signals that God will work toward redemption in other ways, other covenants. Ultimately, the Christian story is that God will redeem through God's own self-giving love. Through willing submission to human evil, God will drown evil in flood of divine love that holds the promise of redemption for the whole creation.

The epistle lesson for the day points us in this direction, connecting the waters of Noah's flood to the waters of baptism and the consummation of Christ's reign of righteousness and peace. As Martin Luther taught in the Flood Prayer that informs many baptismal liturgies, the waters of the Great Flood, the waters of the Jordan, and the waters of our own baptism are all part of God's long story of redemption.

Lent 2

There is an embarrassment of riches for Lent 2, as well as an unusually large number of problems in terms of the listings being lifted out of their context. The selections from Genesis 17, for example, not only start and stop in awkward places, but they are a very long way from Genesis 11:30, which gives Genesis 17 its dramatic impact. Moreover, the verses listed from Psalm 22, while powerful in their own right, lose their real punch when separated from the opening lines of the psalm, which Jesus famously quoted from the cross. Finally in this regard, the verses suggested from Mark 8 identify clearly Peter's inability to grasp the necessity (inevitability) of crucifixion, but they do not let that misunderstanding stand in stark contrast to his

famous affirmation that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Peter’s bold declaration appears but a few short verses before the verses listed for this week. In addition to sorting through these problems of context, preachers will also have to decide if Paul’s strong affirmation of faith, like that of Abraham in the Romans text, is so weighted by being seen in contrast to law that unpacking it might be better suited for a study group than for preaching. That would be unfortunate, but it may be true. The greater truth of the Romans text certainly informs strongly what it means to be a covenant community at worship during Lent 2021.

In keeping with our suggestion of focusing on God’s covenantal relationship with humankind, we are encouraging a careful revisiting of the familiar name-changing covenant God established with Abraham and Sarah. Moreover, since 2021 will no doubt be a year in which worshipers will be experiencing hopelessness on many fronts, we suggest nudging worshipers in the direction of Genesis 10 and 11 as prelude to the Genesis 17 texts. With the exception of the Tower of Babel narrative in 11:1-9, those two chapters are nothing more (nor less!) than a listing of the generations from Noah to Abram and Sarai. Reading all of those hard to pronounce names of old men in morning worship is not advised, but reading enough of them to set the tone could be quite effective when one concludes by reading 11:30, where it abruptly declares that Sarai, in contrast to all the unnamed wives of those old men, was barren.

In other words, in the parlance of Genesis, there was no future for the people of God. Before Abram and Sarai, the history of God’s people moved along, if not always swimmingly, at least consistently. Then suddenly, there was no visible way forward. It was exactly against that backdrop that God established the covenant with Abram and Sarai wherein God promised to be their God, and against all odds, God called them to faithfulness as they stepped out into the promise of God to make of them a people of hope for all people. As heirs to that covenant in 2021 look out the windows of the church and see picture after picture and landscape after landscape of hopelessness, it could be quite helpful to lead people of faith in seeing themselves (ourselves) as party to that covenant in which, against all odds, we are called to faithfulness as we move in hope toward the promises of the God who is ever faithful.

Importantly and not at all coincidentally, the necessity of sacrifice on the part of Jesus set out in the Mark 8 text is crucially important for us to see as the people of God move into what seems to be a hopelessly barren world. Moreover, on the journey the encouragement of Paul to us as descendants of Abraham and Sarah to use the faith given to us by our faithful God to “hope against hope” is what will keep us from dissolving into despair in these interim troubled times. And at last, the covenant people can realistically hope/believe that the anguished cry from Psalm 22 quoted by Jesus from the cross will conclude with the affirmation that “Posterity will serve (God); future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn...” (Ps. 22:30-31).

Lent 3

Before turning to the texts for Lent 3, we would invite you to look out on the wider culture. What stories tell us about the god or gods we worship? There is a strong narrative called capitalistic wealth creation and another narrative about the competition among nations. For the last year, we’ve been living a narrative called “surviving COVID19.” Now look more closely at the stories in your congregation, the personal

stories. For some, there's the story of climbing up the ladder and for others, the story of working for the weekend. For many in our older congregations, the primary story is about enjoying a well-earned retirement, or most recently, surviving until it's safe to go out again.

This idea that the stories we live tell us about who our god is rattles around in the background of each of the texts for this week in Lent. Let's begin with the reading from Exodus, which continues the theme we suggest of reading the Hebrew covenants. In terms of the arc of the Hebrew covenants, the most important verses in this reading are 1-2: "Then God spoke all these words: 'The Lord your God, the One who has brought you out of the land of Egypt and the house of slavery.'" In a deep way, this is God's story and thus God's revealed identity even more than the enigmatic name given to Moses at the burning bush. If you read the Hebrew scriptures and ask "Who is God?" the answer is whoever brought Israel out of Egypt. That narrative of divine liberation is the fundamental context for these "ten words," which is a better translation than ten commandments.

Why are these words given? Contrary to common assumptions, they were not meant to remind would-be criminals what not to do, and they were not supposed to put the fear of God in a teenager thinking about smashing his neighbor's mailbox. The preacher might start there because the congregation might well be there, but these ten words are about a life of freedom, not duty. God spoke these words to give shape to a life lived in gratitude to the One who delivers, who brought Israel out of Egypt.

At first glance, it seems difficult to connect the Old Testament lesson to the New Testament readings for the day. Indeed, the preacher should feel no pressure to do so. In general, it's a better practice to choose one of the lectionary texts for a preaching focus. Still, when we see the texts together, some new insights emerge. In the gospel reading, we read about Jesus' zeal for his Father's house, clearing the Temple of moneychangers. When Jesus was challenged about the authority by which he could do this, he responded, "Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (Jn 2:19). For the hard of hearing, John adds, "He was speaking of the temple of his body" (Jn 2:21). This is another narrative answer to the question who is God. Read the Old Testament and ask, "Who is God?" and the answer is whoever brought Israel out of Egypt. If you read the New Testament and ask that question, the answer is whoever raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus is making a claim about his divinity and his relationship to the Father, and John is putting it right up front in this gospel instead of at the end, where the synoptics put it. In other words, the one who is about to speak and do all these things, including be crucified, is the Lord your God who brought Israel out of Egypt.

Depending on which story tells the story of our god or gods, that claim might be a stumbling block or seem like utter foolishness (1 Co 1:19). The Psalmist would have us believe that meditating on this story, letting it seep into our souls as the story of our God, is one of the most wondrous things a human person can do. The Torah of God (which in Hebrew is not only the law, but the whole Pentateuch) revives the soul, makes wise the simple, rejoices the heart, and enlightens the eyes (Ps 19:7-8).

Lent 4

The Lectionary dishes up some interesting challenges for Lent 4. First and most obvious, the gospel lesson includes John 3:16, the verse that is surely the most quoted

in all of the Christian cannon of sacred texts. Bringing fresh insight to it can be a perplexing problem. Happily, the Lectionary offers up some interesting alternatives, first in one important thing the Lectionary listing does not do and then in other important things that it does do.

What the Lectionary does not do is include the Nicodemus narrative in the Gospel lesson. If the preacher chooses, of course, she may return it to its rightful place for some very powerful preaching. In any event, whether one explicitly connects this lesson to the Nicodemus narrative or not, the truth of that story must be kept in the near background if the preacher uses the Gospel lesson as listed, which is our recommendation. There are other opportunities in the Lectionary cycle to deal with the Nicodemus narrative.

A safe and yet important way to approach preaching this week is to let the movement of the Gospel lesson as listed (Jn 3:14-21) inform not only the substance of the sermon but the shape the sermon as well. First, the very familiar John 3:16 is introduced with a reference to an image in the Old Testament lesson (more about that later). John uses the picture of a serpent held up on a pole to foreshadow the cross of Christ. The gospel lesson then moves to a bold (not to mention familiar) affirmation of the love of God and a call to “whosoever” to believe as a requisite to everlasting life. Moving from there in verse 17, that view of salvation hope is then broadened immeasurably to include salvation for the whole created order. Then, in one final movement, the text affirms in the strongest possible terms that believing in Jesus is essential if one is to see and live into the light and hope revealed in and through Jesus, the Christ. Indeed, according to John, those who do not so believe walk in darkness. As the preacher moves through the concluding (judgmental) verses, she should be careful not to forget and to remind the congregation that the purpose of such judgment is that the whole world should see and walk in the light of Christ (v. 17).

A more challenging and yet potentially timely approach to preaching this week would be to focus on the Numbers text (21:4-9) as cited by John and listed as the Old Testament lesson. It, of course, points to the bronze serpent held on a pole as a symbol depicting the worst that could happen becoming the symbol of greatest hope for God’s covenant people as they wander about in wastelands in pursuit of God promise. Little wonder John picked up that image as a prelude to viewing the cross of Christ. The analogy, of course, falls apart, but the truth of the imperfect analogy is nevertheless clear.

In the Numbers narrative, the narrator clearly believes God sent the venomous serpents to punish the people for their grumbling faithlessness. That said, one may rightly conclude that in addition to a means of punishment, the serpent plague was also used to teach the covenant people important things about themselves, their faith, and, most importantly, about their God. That is, surely, they came to realize (again!) the importance of trusting God to lead them through their present wilderness experience and into God’s covenantal promise to them. Unlike the Numbers narrator and some (a few?) of our latter-day Christian brothers and sisters, we do not believe God sends such things as hurricanes, earthquakes, pandemics, and wildfires to punish God’s people. We do, however, believe strongly that in the midst and wake of such catastrophic events, God teaches us things about ourselves, our faith, our God, and, most importantly, about trusting God to lead us through our various wastelands to God’s promise for us. In the pandemic, for example, compare the selfless service

of medical and relief workers to the selfishness of those who refuse to wear masks, maintain social distancing, and insist on holding large gatherings despite all scientific advice to the contrary. Likewise, examples of shameless greed compared to unspeakable generosity in the wake of natural disasters are more than abundant. How much greater, then, is the grace of God displayed in the cross of Christ than even the grace we see clearly displayed in God's most faithful servants.

Lent 5

For the last four weeks, we have encouraged preachers to consider following the thread of covenants through each of the Old Testament lessons. This week we come to the climax of the covenantal journey with the words of Jeremiah. As a whole, the book of Jeremiah is dark and nearly hopeless, and many of the themes in the larger book may resonate with today's beleaguered worshipers. Jeremiah prophesizes judgment against Judah for its sins, chief among which was idolatry. The prophet, though, clearly loves his people and his nation, and so has a painful task of announcing their impending destruction at the hands of foreign powers, what we now know as the exile. Against this larger backdrop of doom, chapters 30-33 shine out with words of hope.

As dark as it is and as dark as it will yet become, God's judgment has limits. The God who brought Israel out of Egypt will not abandon them; the God who loved them like a spouse will not leave them forever. God will make one more covenant, and in this new covenant, the law will be written not on stone tablets, but on the hearts of the people. They will no longer need to teach one another God's way. It will be their very nature. They will desire what God desires and will what God wills, by instinct. As water covered the earth to cleanse it in the days of Noah, now God's forgiveness will flow like a cleansing flood.

This language of new covenant is deeply resonant with the Christian proclamation, but before we move there, the preacher may want to pause and reflect on the promise itself. To borrow the title of a contemporary hymn, "What is the world like when God's will is done?" What does a family look like when all, oldest to youngest, acknowledge the Lord? What do our communities look like when we desire what God desires? What do nations look like when God's ways are their ways? The hope of this text is that this dream-world, a world that is put right, is more than a pipe dream—it's God's promise.

For the Christian preacher, this promise is fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the story we will soon tell. The gospel proclamation is that in the person of Jesus, the promise of a new covenant has been actualized: in the supper he instituted, Jesus recreated the Passover meal that marked the flight out of Egypt; in the shedding of his blood, so flows God's forgiveness. In the words of John's Gospel, in him and in his death "is the judgment of the world. The ruler of the world is driven out" (12:31). Said another way, the prayer of David in Psalm 51 is fulfilled, and not just for one but for all. By the power of the Spirit, God blots out iniquity and creates a clean heart and a right spirit (51:10) in the people God has made and claimed for God's own.

For the congregation that is living through dark days, just as for Jeremiah's people, this new covenant is still a hope and feels terribly far off. Yet even though we do not yet possess this hope, by faith we hold on to it, and we do not despair. Even as we

face challenges such as COVID19, a deeply divided nation, an ever warming and changing climate, the continuation of a multi-generational struggle for racial justice, to name only a few, we do not despair. Instead, we tell, and live, the story of the one who rode into Jerusalem in peace, suffered under Pontius Pilate, and on the third day rose again, the source of salvation and the glory of God in a human person.

Conclusion

We began this Lenten journey in the wilderness of Jesus' temptation; we have now arrived in Jerusalem. The gospel reading for the fifth Sunday opens with the famous words that in days past were inscribed on the pulpit to remind the preacher of the purpose of proclamation: "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" (Jn 12:20). Surely that is the hope of every person who cares to hear, or stream, a sermon in this season. It is easy enough to point to the trouble of the world, but no congregation needs its preacher to simply report the news. It is also relatively easy, and awfully tempting, to simply call a congregation to do better, to row harder against the storm of a world that seems less and less like the kingdom of God. The congregation needs more than that.

Beyond the trouble of the world, we need the preacher to point to the grace in the world, which is to say we need the preacher to help us see what God is doing, has done, and promises to do. Yes, it's dark, but we need the preacher to send up a flare of gospel hope and then in that light share what she sees happening in the world. When we are called to action, when we are called to row against the storm, we need to be reminded that we row with the wind of the Spirit and sail on a divine tide that flows toward God's good future.

Indeed, we wish to see Jesus. Jesus the Christ is God's future, the fulfillment of God's long project of putting the world right. God began the work with Noah and a bow in the sky, continued with a laughable promise made to Abraham and Sarah, stayed by the people when they wandered with serpents in the wilderness, wrote ten words on stone tablets and commanded they be taught from one generation to another. And when all else failed, in steadfast love, God became the Word Incarnate, crucified and risen, who even now is making all things new.