

Preaching the Lenten Texts

Bill Goettler

Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Connecticut

Three years have passed since Easter. Three years, since the last spring morning when the faithful of every land were able to gather, to embrace, to sing in full voice the songs of proclamation and celebration of Christ's resurrection that are so central to our Christian faith.

In that first year, before the pandemic was upon us, we were in more familiar space, as a spring turned to summer, then a new school year began, and finally the sounds of Christmas gladness rang out and pointed us toward Epiphany. That is not to say that we were undisturbed, or that even that time was very normal. Christians who were paying attention to the events taking place in American society—events that by now have become a sort of progressive preacher's litany—were increasingly anxious with the ever more evident changes in the climate, with the fires across the west, and violent storms throughout the east. We were anxious about political leadership that was leading us in deeply troubling directions, even as we were acknowledging the long history of racialized violence on which our society has been built. On that last Easter, three years ago, few would have claimed that all was right with the world. Even then, we might still have whispered that God seemed nearby, that there was reason for hope in God's emerging activity. Even then, the holy way seemed not too distant.

But that was before we knew what was coming, before the first news that an uncontrolled virus would sweep across the face of God's earth, a pandemic like none known in our lifetimes. No one imagined that a first pandemic Lent and Easter would pass, nearly forgotten, with closed church doors and pastors struggling to become amateur video technicians. And that a year later, another Lent and Easter would go by, with most worship spaces still empty, with *Messiah* choruses ringing out only on video screens, and the few outdoor gatherings still distant and fear-filled.

We dare not approach another Lenten season without recognizing what it has been like for us, for our congregations, for all of earth, to have lived through season after season of such trouble. The too brief moments of hope, of successful vaccine development, of the promise of a new political way, or the end to a global conflict, have been followed too often by disappointing news of still overburdened health care settings and leaders in nearly every realm failing yet again to come to terms with all that ails us.

The unavoidable reality facing people of faith is a sense that many of the things that seemed most secure in our lives are not so certain after all. Governments do not necessarily rule wisely or with justice. Argue as we might with the science, our climate—this very earth—is facing a time of dramatic change. And our health as individuals and as a society is far more fragile than we had come to believe.

More than that, people have secretly been wondering what has become of God? If so many other things that we had long assumed to be stable and trustworthy suddenly seem to be less of both, might the place of the holy in our lives also be threatened? The interruptions, after all, have stretched beyond school closures and compromised work

settings. Since the start of the pandemic, the familiar flow of the Christian liturgical year has come to a stop. Lent and Easter, Pentecost and Advent have blurred in the zoom universe. And as those seasonal markers have seemed less and less significant, some surely wonder, might it be that the activity of God is also not as certain as we had hoped?

For a people well accustomed to a time of Advent waiting that would soon lead to Christmas joy, and the quiet discipline of Lenten reflection and sacrifice that would prepare our hearts for Easter gladness, these three years have shaken the flow of our lives as never before. Oh, the seasons have still advanced predictably, following the calendar's plan. But a sad and even desperate tone has persisted as well, numbing our certainty that, in God's time, our trials dependably result in satisfaction and joy. We are less certain that our waiting will result in the appearance of the light of the world, less sure that our faithful Lenten discipline will lead us to encounter God's blessings.

How are we to preach good news, then, to a people who have endured a time of little promise? How are we to teach about the dependability of God, when that God has, to many, seemed quite absent for a long time? For now we have watched as season after season has passed, and still we await God's redemption of society, God's healing agency, Christ's redeeming power. Oh, we don't want to go here. We don't want to talk about a God who seems to have disappeared from the scene. But three years have passed since we last sang hosannas together. And people have noticed. We dare not pretend that all is well. But what are we to say?

The lectionary gospel readings for the first four weeks in Lent have something important to offer us. So too does most of the rest of scripture, of course, when we let it speak to the reality of this moment. For it seems that we are not the first generation to endure a time of too little hope, when God has seemed much too far away, for far too long.

This year, on the first Sunday in Lent, the Gospel of Luke leads us into the desert with Jesus. One of the challenges of knowing these stories so well, of understanding the Biblical unit of time that is encapsulated in 40 days (or 40 years), is that we know the ending. We know that after 40 days, Noah's flood rains will stop, that after 40 years, God's chosen people will make their way out of the desert and into the promised land. After 40 days, Elijah will find water, and Jesus will leave that godforsaken desert.

Knowing that good will follow bad, we find it convenient to forget that within such times of abandonment and fear, there is no certainty about when the hardships will end. For 40 days, Jesus is alone, afraid, cold at night and thirsty at daybreak. For 40 days, he grows weaker and more vulnerable. What do such desert times mean, we might well ask. Can we hold on to faith when so many of the signs of the time challenge us to be faithless and afraid? How did Jesus do it, how did the people of Israel keep on, how did Noah's clan not come to blows?

Stories of such fearsome waiting will continue in the Gospel readings for the next few weeks of Lent. On the second Sunday of Lent, the thirteenth chapter of Luke makes room for us to consider another way in which Jesus has waited, now "to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings." A growing awareness of such a holy longing to draw us near invites us to know something about the Mothering God who wants to protect us from every harm, and deeply desires for

us to be made whole. And perhaps it also opens our hearts to the anguish that God feels, for that time has not yet come, even now. We wait, of course. So does God, by Jesus' telling. Imagining God waiting, until in the fullness of time, we find ourselves in the place that is right. As the old Shaker hymn suggests,

When true simplicity is gained
To bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed
To turn, turn will be our delight
Til by turning, turning we come 'round right.¹

The third Sunday in Lent returns us to Luke, thirteenth chapter, again to a Jesus who awaits our repentance, our coming to terms with our distance from God and our determination to open our hearts anew. Now we are in the vineyard, considering the fig tree that has borne no fruit. "Wait yet a little longer," the gardener begs. "Wait," Jesus tells those who hear his story, "even though the outcome is yet uncertain." Few care much for this difficult parable. There is a threat, at least implied, for the tree that continues to bear no fruit. But that is an agricultural question, not a theological one. Over and over again we hear the scriptures insist that, in some seasons, we must simply wait. So it is that we must preach.

And then, by the fourth Sunday in Lent, we move to the story of the Prodigals in Luke 15. We know all about the foolish younger son and his petulant big brother. But consider the Prodigals' father, whose life has become one of waiting at the top of the hill, overlooking the road out of town where the boy last walked. The father has heard nothing, received no word of hope or of dread. Only the painful silence. And yet, he waits, with no assurance that there will ever be a messenger. There is, in fact, no reason to believe. There we have it... people acting in faithful ways with no reason, no external evidence, no cosmic certainty.

These Gospel stories just might say something to where we find ourselves as this season of Lent begins, this Lent that comes three years after our last real Easter. If the normal flow of the liturgical year provides God's people with a certain sense of confidence in God's abiding activity, this extended season of separation and silence has caused us to wonder about that confidence. This Lent, we are more in touch with the fragility of our lives, the fragility of all of life on this planet. We are better acquainted with uncertainty than we have been in other times. We know, for sure, that we don't know what lies ahead. Even those who strive to live by their faith may well find it more difficult to be comforted by overly-confident preachers who assure them that their trust will be fulfilled.

Perhaps this long time of pandemic and dis-unity is leading us toward a different perspective about God, a God who offers us no certainty about good news in the ways of human society. Perhaps these really are days for waiting, for seeking, for wondering. Perhaps this Lenten season might hold a time for prayer.

If the virus continues to evolve (or if the vaccines truly take hold with children, and on every continent), if the climate changes become more radical (or if some dramatic change in human industry and lifestyle slows that process), even if society insists on acting in ways that are inhumane (while still exhibiting the best of human kindness)... in all of these possible ways ahead, we still will turn to God. Not because of a reward, not because of the certainty that God will act to repair society. No, we

wait, and we trust in God (these three long years of Lent have taught us), because God invites us to put our trust in God.

What does it mean to live in that liminal space, where this is not certainty? The poet Lucille Clifton writes of the endurance and strength that emerged through her own life experience.

won't you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.²

For Jesus, wandering in the desert, for the hen gathering her brood, for the gardener hoping that the tree will bear fruit, for the prodigal father sitting on the hillside, there is no assurance that a promise will be fulfilled. No deal has been offered, no certainty awaits.

Might this suggest an approach to preaching in Lent, as well, a way to take seriously the profound hurt that we have known, and the needs of a people who gather in a time like no other, a people who have kept on in spite of the peculiar burdens of these years, this season in human history?

Three years have passed since Easter. The dependable patterns of the liturgical seasons are familiar no longer. We walk through the days of Lent, prayerfully. We wait, and we watch, and we keep on. Because that is who God calls us to be.

Notes

1 Elder Joseph Brackett, *Simple Gifts*, Public domain, 1848.

2 Lucille Clifton, "won't you celebrate with me" from *Book of Light* (Copper Canyon Press, 1993).