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Homiletics: Sermon Studies for the New Church Year

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Homiletics

A Series of Sermon Studies for the Church Year

FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

MATT. 18:18-20

The Text and the Day. — This text has no immediate relation to the general thoughts of Advent but concerns itself specifically with the new church year. Its emphasis on the forgiveness of sins, the answers of the Father to the Christians' prayers of trust, and the continuous teaching ministry of our Lord in His Church, attach directly to the Epistle, Collect, and Introit.

Notes on Meaning. — V. 18 repeats the mandate given in Matt. 16:19 and John 20:23. Apparently the Savior continually instructed the disciples as to the nature of the Christian Church — a tool by which men might be loosed from their sins in the name of God, or by which, if they by unbelief rejected its message, their separation from God would be made the more apparent. The Christian Church preaches Law and Gospel: the Law as the diagnosis of man's plight in being separated from God; the Gospel as the announcement that God Himself in Christ Jesus reaches across the gap and looses men from the bonds of sin. — Many people, even Christians, are shocked by the phrase of a Christian pastor or layman, "I forgive you your sins." This text provides opportunity to make clear that the Christian, through his witness to Christ, actually frees man from sin, is the tool by which God Himself brings the heavenly rescue. — Note context of this verse: the procedure in the church by which the spiritual life of members is strengthened through personal admonition and by which the spiritual death of those outward members of the church in whom the Spirit has ceased to function is declared in a new impulse given for commencing the work of salvage from the beginning.

The disciples had been suffering from a power complex; cf. ch. 17:17-27; 18:1-14. Hence the Savior is anxious to make clear that this task of binding and loosing does not depend on power and numbers. Two people constitute the Church (v. 17), that is to say, an organism in which one man takes up responsibility for the spiritual life of another and in which in-

dividuals are together members of the body of Christ. Cf. 1 Corinthians 12; Eph. 3:14-19; 4:11-16. The Savior also emphasizes with v. 19 that evangelism and church discipline are not processes for the enhancing of prestige, but that they represent the yearning and prayerful desire of Christians to draw upon the power of God in heaven to carry out His great purposes through them.

V. 20 is a general principle of which vv. 18 and 19 give one application. It states the principle of the Church (cf. parallels above). A church is not a list or assortment of people, but it is people, even if only two or three, gathered in Jesus' name, that is, gathering because of what Jesus Christ means to them as Savior and Lord, strengthening that meaning in their hearts through His presence, and carrying out the purposes for which He has redeemed them and imparted Himself to them. Cf. Matt. 28:19; Luke 24:47; John 20:22. Christians gather together for worship to Christ, for witness to Christ, for fellowship in Christ, for mutual strengthening and upbuilding to Christ.

Preaching Pitfalls. — The sermon will be preached to refresh in the hearers' minds the nature and purpose of the Christian congregation. It will be important not to leave the impression that only a parish in its worship services or voters' assemblies is described in the text; the text applies also to the "church in the house"; Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philemon 2.

Problem and Goal. — The shortcomings of the hearer to be analyzed in this sermon are a deficient understanding of the church and its life together, a readiness to think of it merely as ritual or fleshly fellowship under religious guise; an apathy toward Word and Sacrament as the central operation of God both to the church itself and to those outside; a reluctance to undertake the tasks of personal witness in and through the church. The goal is to refresh in the hearer's mind and will the nature of his relation to his parish in the coming twelve months of worship and church activity and to make the forgiveness of sins central in his faith and task.

Illustrations. — The text emphasizes the ministerial quality of the church — it does a job for God and people. A host of analogies present themselves: the mother providing meals for the family, for all the members of the family who will eat, for no member of the family who refuses to eat; the mother

constructs a setting at mealtime favorable for good eating; father and mother work together in special ways for making each meal possible. — The prayerful attitude (v. 19) is not a matter of the mouth speaking prayers or of the heart listing desires, but of the total Christian reaching out to God for the one help to the problem. Brother and sister in the family may have selfish desires which run counter to the interests of the total family; but when they agree on a matter and come to their parents with it, we are quite probably observing a family need and the desire to remedy it.

Outline:

**THE CHURCH'S PROGRAM FOR ANOTHER YEAR
OF WORSHIP AND WORK**

- I. The Church's business.
 - A. To bring the forgiveness of sins to people.
 - B. This implies making clear the deadliness of unbelief.
 - C. But it likewise implies the absorption in witnessing to our salvation in Jesus Christ.
- II. The Church's nature.
 - A. What is this mighty organization that can represent God?
 - B. It is simply people (even two or three) who are together and who are for each other.
- III. The Church's confidence.
 - A. God Himself guarantees to answer the Church's prayers.
 - B. Christ Himself is in the Church's midst.

RICHARD R. CAEMMERER

SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

LUKE 12:35-48

The Text and the Day. — During the season of Advent (coming) we think of the Lord's coming into the flesh as the Savior of the world and also of His coming to Judgment. The Introit and the Collect of this day refer to the first and the Gradual to the second coming. Christ's first coming should prepare us for the second coming.

Notes on Meanings. — The Lord had given the admonition not to provide for ourselves treasures on this earth, but rather “a treasure in the heavens that faileth not” (v. 33). This admonition is given also in view of the Lord’s return to Judgment, in order that we be prepared to meet Him. “Let your loins be girded about” (v. 35) by taking up the lower part of the loose garment into the girdle, as was done when people were about to work or travel (Acts 12:8; 2 Kings 4:29). “Lights burning” (v. 35; Matt. 25:1). Those are prepared who are found in true faith in their Savior. — Ready to “open unto Him immediately” (v. 36); not as some people who are satisfied with the “cleanliness” and “orderliness” in their home, but do not like to entertain visitors before first putting everything into better condition. Christians should always so live that they are ready at any day to meet their Lord; they do not and cannot know the time of His coming (vv. 38-40); He will come as a thief in the night (v. 39; 1 Pet. 3:10; 1 Thess. 5:1-2). In other words, Christians should be faithful servants, showing forth their faith also by their good works, being always conscious of their duties, responsibilities, and opportunities (vv. 41-46). Fidelity and wisdom should be found in a faithful servant (v. 42) in order that he might be a faithful steward. If not found so, the servant will be cut “asunder” (v. 46, Heb. 11:37; 1 Sam. 16:33). — Punishment will be meted out according to the servant’s knowledge and opportunity (vv. 47-48). There will be degrees of punishment in hell, punishment well deserved. God will acknowledge the faithfulness of His servant (v. 37). The faithful servant will enter into eternal salvation, and even there, there will be degrees of glory, given not according to merit, but by grace (vv. 37, 42; Rev. 3:21; Luke 18:14; John 13:4-5; Dan. 12:3).

Preaching Pitfalls. The preacher should be careful not to speak of faithfulness apart from faith; faithfulness is the result of faith. Those who are found in faith, knowing and acknowledging their sins and finding comfort in God’s grace, given in Christ Jesus, have full and free forgiveness; these are the ones whose loins are girded about and whose lights are burning. These, then, also will be faithful in serving the Lord. While justification is 100 per cent perfect, because it is what God does, our sanctification, because of our sinful flesh, the world, and the devil, is yet very imperfect, and therefore we need

to be continually admonished and encouraged by the mercies of God to present our bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God (Rom. 12: 1).

Preaching Emphases. — The Lord will return to Judgment. No one can know when. We should be ready in true faith to receive Him immediately, by faithful stewardship. Punishment for the unfaithful and gracious reward for the faithful.

Problem and Goal. — Because we are living in a world given to materialism and because there is indifferentism to doctrine and a godly life even among people calling themselves Christians, we must seek to arouse our Christian people to be aware of all of these conditions, examine themselves, and, by the grace of God, believe right and live right.

Outline:

For an introductory thought see the "Text and the Day."

**WHO IS THAT SERVANT WHO IS READY TO MEET
HIS LORD COMING TO JUDGMENT?**

- I. He who is aware that the Lord will come, but knows not when (vv. 36, 38-40).
- II. He who is found in true faith (v. 35).
- III. He who is faithful in the performance of his duties in accordance with his endowments and opportunities (vv. 41-46).
- IV. He who is not looking for a deserved, but merely for a gracious reward (vv. 37, 42, 47, 48).

JOHN H. C. FRITZ

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

LUKE 3:3-14

The Text and the Day. — The coming of the Kingdom and the necessity and method of preparing for it are the heart of this Gospel. That makes clear its relevance to the Advent season, which calls upon God's children to prepare also for the coming of their King on Christmas Day.

Notes on Meaning. — Preliminary (vv. 1-3). It may strike us as strange that Luke in these verses notes in such detail the exact time when John began his ministry; but only if we

forget of what paramount importance the coming of God's kingdom was and is to the world.

And it is well to remember in connection with the tremendous importance of the preaching of John that that preaching and its timing was not of John but of God: "*The Word of God came unto John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness.*"

Vv. 4-6. This event was long ago foretold in the poetic language of Isaiah, alluding, perhaps, to the preparations made for the triumphant entrances of ancient kings. His poetic language should not be scrutinized for details to be spiritualized. It is to impress us profoundly with the necessity of removing every hindrance to the coming of the King.

Vv. 7-9. John preached a Baptism of repentance, and so the multitude by coming to his Baptism signified that it felt the need of repentance. But what about the motive and character of their repentance? "Who hath warned you to flee from the Wrath to Come?" In other words, what prompts your repentance? John is concerned about a really thorough-going change of heart, one reflected in a fundamental change of *conduct*.

He anticipates the ready desire of the soul to by-pass a radical change of heart and life by appealing to an external status. But John insists: "Begin not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our Father; for I say unto you that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham." People who rest secure on external relations are spiritually dead, as dead as stones, and unless they repent, God will replace them by such as are real children of His. The reluctance of all of us to renew our lives and, instead, to seek security in externals is a readily discernible application of this part of the text.

The urgency of this radical change of heart and conduct is dramatically pictured by an ax already lying with its sharp edge against the root of a tree. He who yields the ax is watching, and woe to the tree that does not bring forth good fruit!

Vv. 10-14. The Spirit-given power of John's message is evidenced by the response of his hearers: What shall we *do*? He shattered every false hope, and they are shaken to the core. His answer strikes at sin, the basic root of all evil; at selfishness, as evidenced in a lack of charity; at greediness, which leads to dishonesty and cruelty; at discontent with one's earthly

lot and reward. How applicable the image at the present time to the heartlessness of the rich, the dishonesty of the bureaucrats, the discontent of labor, in brief, the rampant materialism of this generation.

Preaching Pitfalls. — There is, on the one hand, a danger of dulling the effects of Johns' hammer blows in an excessive fear lest people trust in their works for salvation; there is, on the other hand, the danger of so treating the text that the hearers are deprived of the comfort of salvation by grace. The solution lies in emphasizing that the King who is coming will so deal with repentant hearts that by His forgiveness and His power changed lives will be effected if His entrance is not resisted.

Problem and Goal. — The right preparation for Christmas is spiritual and consists in the recognition of one's depravity and helplessness as well as the recognition of God's free and full forgiveness for the Redeemer's sake. Such a real and vital faith will and must be evidenced by a changed life.

Outline:

TRUE REPENTANCE

I. What is it?

A. It consists in casting one's self completely on the Lord.

1. Not on self (v. 8).
2. But on God (vv. 4, 6).

B. It issues in a complete renewal of life.

1. Every living thing must produce (v. 9).
2. In every area of life (vv. 4, 6).

II. Why it is important.

A. Without it man is doomed (v. 9).

B. With it man is saved (v. 6).

WALTER O. SPECKHARD

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT

JOHN 3:27-30

The Text and the Day. — This last Sunday before Christmas was known in ancient days as the Preparation. Its foremost purpose was to answer the question: "O Lord, how shall

I meet Thee, how welcome Thee aright?" In answer, the Epistle issues the call for joy, gentleness, prayer, and thanksgiving. The Gospel, on the other hand, stresses John the Baptist's rare humility and self-effacement. All this is beautifully brought together in our text as the true preparation for Christmas.

Notes on Meaning. — To the great surprise of his followers the Baptist remains undisturbed at the report of Jesus' success, not only accepting the situation in all meekness, but actually defending the activities of Jesus. In v. 27 he states a truth expressed in more detail by Gamaliel (Acts 5: 38-39). — Our modern "best man" may not be an exact counterpart of the Jewish friend of the bridegroom, yet the application is very apt. It is the former's duty to minister to the comfort and happiness of the groom and not become jealous nor seek to usurp the limelight. So today pastor and people should exalt Christ. — The "must" in v. 30 is that of divine necessity originating in God's will and purpose. The expression "no man" is relative; there were exceptions then, including the speaker. V. 33: By believing, the individual Christian confesses before the world that God is true in His words, ways, and promises, though these may often transcend human comprehension. V. 34: John's meaning is that God granted the gift of His faith-creating Spirit through the preaching of Jesus, not out of a measure. Hence also for us the Word is the God-ordained vehicle of the Holy Spirit into the hearts of men, and we should proclaim it faithfully. V. 36: God's verdict is already in force: The believer has life *now*, the unbeliever is under God's wrath *now*. See v. 18.

Preaching Pitfalls. — Since this text is so rich in content, the preacher will do well to stay close to the points mentioned in the first paragraph and not enter upon a lengthy discussion and application of the additional material found in vv. 31-36, except to stress the deity of Christ at the appropriate place as well as the fact that God's verdict has already been pronounced (v. 36).

Preaching Emphases. — The chief stress should be placed upon John the Baptist's correct appraisal of the Christ, which led to his selfless humility as well as to his great joy. John's willingness to step aside looms all the greater when we remember that he was then in the prime of life and at the

apex of his career, a man whose coming was foretold by the Prophets, who entered the world in miracle fashion, to whom even the Sanhedrin felt constrained to send a delegation. These facts should be brought out forcefully.

Outline:

THE SECRET OF TRUE CHRISTMAS JOY

It consists:

- I. In accepting and confessing Jesus as the God-sent Redeemer.
- II. In bowing in willing contentment to His authority in all things.

I

- A. The text story, together with John's confession (v. 28).
 1. This conviction concerning Jesus had been created early in his life and sealed by God's testimony at Jesus' Baptism.
 2. The knowledge that he was serving the very Christ of God, his own personal Savior (cf. Matt. 3:14), gave him enduring incentive and joy (v. 29 b).
- B. We, pastors and people, can have true Christmas joy only when we share John's conviction. All other views concerning Jesus and the Scriptures are insufficient and unable to impart true and lasting joy.

II

- A. True joy is preserved and enhanced only when accompanied by willing contentment to bow to Christ's authority:
 1. The temptation to jealousy and resentment was strong. The homage of all Israel was his for the taking, as the sending of a delegation by the Sanhedrin shows.
 2. But in spite of his greatness (Matt. 11:11) the Baptist was willing to step aside and let his Lord increase (vv. 29-30).
- B. If we would possess lasting joy, we must be willing to decrease by banishing all thought of personal worthiness, confessing Christ before men, bringing every thought in subjection to the obedience of

Christ, placing ourselves and our talents into His service, striving for growth in daily sanctification, uncomplaining submission in time of trouble and affliction. Refusal to do these things will drive peace and joy from the heart.

- C. All depends on the right relation to Christ (v. 36). May we by God's grace decrease and pray Him to let Christ increase in and through us.

OTTO E. SOHN

CHRISTMAS DAY

JOHN 1:1-14

The Text and the Day. — The text presents the story of the Christmas Gospel and Epistle from the viewpoint of eternity. "A Child is born," "Unto you is born." Text: "The Word was made flesh." — "Unto us," "Unto you," "To all men." Text: "Lighteth every man that cometh into the world." — "Wonderful," "The glory of the Lord." Text: "We beheld His glory." — "His name shall be . . . the mighty God," "The great God and our Savior, Jesus Christ," "Christ the Lord." Text: "The Word was God."

Notes on Meaning. — The magnitude of the message is emphasized by the many independent sentences. Vv. 1-5 use only *kai*; not until v. 7 is there a *hina*, and no *de* until v. 12. "In the beginning": from eternity; before there was a beginning. "The Word": the personal Word. As we make our inner life known through our words, the Word, Jesus Christ, became the direct revelation of God to men (Matt. 11:27). "The Word was with God, and the Word was God." Cf. the explanation to the Second Article of the Creed: "true God, begotten of the Father from eternity." Jesus Christ revealed Himself as the mighty God through the work of creation (Ps. 33:6; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:10). Not only is He Life Himself (Col. 3:4), but He also imparts life (John 11:25). He is the Light of the world (John 8:12) — a transition of thought. Light not only fosters life, but it gives guidance and direction. It reveals itself and all illuminated by its rays (Ps. 36:9). Light points to the purity and sinlessness of Christ. Christ showed Himself as the Light of the world through the Old Testament Prophets, who had John as their foremost representative.

Christ Himself was the full Revelation. He was in the world throughout the Old Testament period, but even in those early days they knew Him not (Gen. 6:5; Ex. 5:2; Dan. 3:15 b. "His own" were the Jews). "He gave power"—it is the gift of God that people are saved. In every age of the world justification is by grace, through faith. Cf. "As many as received Him," "That believed on His name." "Sons of God" refers to our regeneration. It is entirely by the grace of God. "Flesh" is the human nature of Christ according to His body and soul (1 Tim. 3:16; 1 John 4:2). In His incarnation Christ showed His grace; proved the truth of all Old Testament prophecy, and revealed the absolute truth of God. "His glory" includes all the attributes of God.

Preaching Pitfalls.—A philosophical dissertation on the *Logos* will bring little edification to the hearers in a Christmas service. Care should be taken not to lose oneself in the many short sentences; they rather trace the glory of the Son of God from eternity through creation and Old Testament revelation to the climax of His incarnation.

Preaching Emphases.—The sermon should stress the glory of our Savior. Frequent reference can be made to Is. 9:6 and the Christmas Gospel. The entire text is held on a very high plane, which should be reflected in the sermon. "Glory to God in the highest!"

Problem and Goal.—The glory of the Christ Child in all His grace and truth is to be presented with such appeal that the hearers lay hold on salvation and deny ungodliness and "live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world." The preacher must himself be filled with joy and thanksgiving at God's gift (John 3:16) and impart the same to his hearers.

Illustrations.—Before there was life on earth, God gave light; so before there could be spiritual life in us, God gave the Light of the world.—As the conception and birth of Christ was a miracle, so is our regeneration. It is not by the will of man.

Outline:

THE GLORY OF THE CHRIST CHILD

I. The glory of His divine power (vv. 1-4 a).

A. His eternal Godhead.

B. His almighty power.

II. The glory of His divine revelation (vv. 4 b-11, 14 a).

- A. The manner of His revelation: theophanies in Old Testament; through the Prophets and John; and His life on earth.**
- B. The extent of His revelation: "The Light of men," "in the world," "He came unto His own."**

III. The glory of His divine grace (vv. 12-14).

- A. He gave power to become the sons of God.**
- B. He dwelt among us.**
- C. He imparts divine truth.**

VICTOR MENNICKE

NEW YEAR'S DAY

MATT. 28: 20 b

The Text and the Day. — There is no Introit provided for New Year's Eve, but the Introit for a Day of Humiliation and Prayer would be very suitable. It presents more than a superficial look into the past with the assurance of God's never-failing mercy, and this mercy of God in turn gives us the strongest possible hope for the future. The Collect can either come from the same source as the Introit, or the special Collect for New Year's Eve, given in the agenda, would be equally suitable. The lections can be found in the hymnal, page 156, and carry the theme of the occasion in a most forceful way. The Epistle, which presents a striking contrast between the transitoriness of all human life and the enduring quality of the Word of the Lord, the Gospel preached to the people, and the Gospel lesson which emphasizes the long-suffering of God with its ever giving man one more chance: both create an atmosphere in which the Christian soul must dwell for its salvation.

Notes on Meaning. — The text itself is very clear. Whatever else it may do, with the exclamation "lo" it fastens the attention on Christ. Christ Himself, now the glorified and risen Lord, who has finished man's salvation and conquered sin, death, and the devil, this very Christ, the God-Man, He will be with us alway, all the days, until the consummation of the eon. This passage of time, which the numbering of the years emphasizes and which the passing of the years solemnly

tolls into our very being, will not go on endlessly. It will all reach its consummation when men will no more act and live as they do now. But during all the days and years that it does go on, Christ will be with us. Certainly, from the very content of the promise, it is evident that Christ is speaking to more than His band of disciples there assembled, so that in the promise itself is the assurance from none other than the Church's Head that the Church will continue to the end of time. "God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved. God shall help her, and that right early" (Ps. 46:5). "Even as He has instituted His Holy Supper for the certain assurance and confirmation of this, that also according to that nature according to which He has flesh and blood He will be with us, and dwell, work, and be efficacious in us" (*Concordia Triglotta*, p. 1043). As Christ had been with the disciples in the past, so He would be with them in the future, even though He was now taking His visible presence from them; and as Christ was with the disciples, so He will be with us. As faith relies on this promise, it sees the past as the leading of a merciful Savior and faces the future with a courage that is Christ-given. Nothing shall separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord, who is ever present with us.

Preaching Pitfalls. — It would seem from the setting of this text, the giving of the Great Commission, that Christ takes obedience for granted. The promise might easily lull the flesh into a sense of security if the sermon fails to emphasize that reliance upon the present Christ cannot be divorced from walking in the ways which He has commanded. Christ does not go where we want Him to go according to our carnal desires. Rather we go where He leads contrary to our fleshly will and selfishness. This is always our sin, as the past plainly tells us, that we try to use God and even Christ instead of letting God and His Christ use us. But though the past abounds with our sins, the Christ with us is the Christ of the crucifixion, the Christ of the great invitation, the Christ who is our Mediator and High Priest, who pleads our cause for us. The very fact that He tells us now and at all times that He is with us means that our sins have not driven Him away, and in Him, ever graciously present, there is forgiveness. Only believe that that is why He is present.

Problem and Goal. — The problem of our people is the

same as the problem of the disciples present when this promise was spoken: facing life and tasks beyond the resources of our own abilities. Hence the care and worry of our lives, the fears and the insecurity, the flatlands of tolerable situations instead of the highlands of Christian joy. The goal therefore must be to make them aware of the presence of Christ, in which there is joy, from which we draw courage, and with which there is peace such as the world cannot give.

Outline:

CHRIST WITH US

I. The past:

A. The Lord hath helped us hitherto.

B. His promised presence now assures us that He forgives us our past.

II. The future:

A. He shall be with us all the days.

B. His grace shall be sufficient for our weakness.

C. His purposes shall be our purposes.

WILLIAM A. BUEGE

