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Richard R. Caemmerer
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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Preaching in Lent

By RICHARD R. CAEMMERER

IN one sense Lenten preaching needs no special focus. Preaching should be just that in every season of the Christian year, the good news of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. In the weeks which the church through many centuries has set apart for the special consideration of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, this preaching should be especially vigorous and explicit.

Many a preacher finds it necessary, however, to give special thought to his Lenten preaching. He may be among those who rarely prepare more than one sermon a week and so struggle under the added labor of the special evening series of Lenten sermons. Perhaps he is in a community where church attendance is especially ample in Lententide—or has television made its inroads everywhere?—and hence he is anxious to excel and self-conscious about his limitations. Or perhaps his congregation has customs of Lenten piety that seem to hamper good preaching of the Gospel, like special fundraising efforts, or the expectation to dwell on physical aspects of the Passion for the sake of emotional penitence. Perhaps he dreads not so much the beginning but the end of the Lenten season and the prospect of “that preached-out feeling” after Easter Sunday. These lines purpose to canvass some of the special problems and possible answers.

I

THE SUNDAY MORNINGS IN LENT

Occasionally an ambitious preacher will advertise a Lenten series of 15 services, in-

cluding the Wednesdays beginning with Ash Wednesday, the six Sundays in Lent, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday. The titles may look ingenious. But as the weeks progress, the preacher's glow fades. He finds it hard not to repeat himself. Right in the season when the basic affirmation concerning the Lord Jesus should be most moving and heartfelt, he has to resort to rhetoric or to storytelling to keep himself interested.

The basic significance of Lententide is drawn from the church's liturgy. The meaning of the Sundays in Lent, as the church has pondered and taught it nearly 2,000 years, is there to be used. These are the Sundays prior to Easter. They do not outrank Easter in joy, for it is the most signal discipline of praise during the year. But each of them is also an Easter; every Lord's Day is the day of His resurrection. Lent is a time of preparation for Easter, and much of the individual and corporate devotion of Christians seeks to draw mind and heart into a discipline of faith and concentration on the Savior's work. But each Sunday morning in Lent is still the Lord's day. The Gospels portray the Redeemer about His Father's business, withstanding the devil's attack on His own heart, healing, feeding, rebuking, and always moving forward unflinchingly like a general on a strenuously planned campaign to make the final charge. The epistles portray the counterpart of His work in the company of Christians, as the Gospel is preached and practiced among them. Scholars of the liturgy suggest that the

Fourth Sunday is an interlude of joy in the midst of solemnity; actually its propers do not excel those of the other Lenten Sundays in urgency of prayer and serenity of faith. Churchly customs of paraments and hymnody should not be allowed to quench this note of earnest but joyous review of the Redeemer's work for the salvation of His people. The church prepares for the rejoicing of Easter, not by being sad but by growing in faith.

Where the preacher employs one of the 30 or more pericopic systems for his preaching texts on Sundays in Lent, he will find these positive accents of the traditional propers preserved. He will do well to plan those days carefully in advance, to deploy the resources of hymnody over the entire brace of six services to correlate closely, and to see to it that the themes in the special course of Lenten evening sermons are, week by week, in sufficient contrast to make the preparation and preaching not an arduous memory feat but an enjoyable broadening of the message of the Gospel.

This is not to suggest that the preacher will be silent concerning the Lenten theme on his Sunday mornings. For what is the Lenten theme? It is not, in first place, the piety of the people. It is, first and last, the redeeming act of God in Christ, from the moment that the Spirit of God leads Christ into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil, until, with face forward yet meek, He rides to His death on the first Palm Sunday. The earnestness, the penitence, the high resolves for a godly life, the increase in practical piety, and the use of the means of grace, on the part of the people, all stem from, or seek to share by faith, this redeeming act of Jesus Christ.

Passion Sunday will normally give especially direct recognition to the work of redemption by Christ. The bitter Gospel for the day will not be used to describe the Christians who that day receive Holy Communion or confess their faith. But it will be employed to portray the onward march of Christ's purpose, against every obstacle, to die for the sins of the world, and the Epistle for the day will bring the whole story of His going to the Father, through the breaking of His own body and shedding of His own blood in sacrifice on the cross, to redeem mankind. Sometimes the unity of the day is complicated on Palm Sunday by confirmations, but it need not be so. For nothing can be more important to catechumens at the end of their instruction than to ponder their Savior's inflexible intention to redeem them from death, and hence to cast their own garments of praise at His feet.

II

THE EVENING LENTEN SERIES

More difficult than the Sunday mornings in Lent are the sermons prepared in a special course as a discipline of Lenten worship. How shall the pastor produce sermons that are practical, varied, memorable, and different from year to year? How shall he succeed in his purpose right through to the climax in Holy Week?

Lent has seven Wednesday evenings. While that number irresistibly suggests a course on the Seven Words from the Cross, ordinarily a series of more than four or five units is very difficult to manage. Hence it will usually be found conducive to worship and expedient to make the sermon on Ash Wednesday, likewise the units on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, independent of the actual Lenten course.

This is workable, particularly since traditional accents and the full apparatus of propers are available for these services.

The evening services in which the special course of Lenten sermons is presented have traditionally no one uniform structure. Many employ a minimum of hymnody, lection, and prayer. Others use the Common Service, with or without Holy Communion. Others utilize the order of vespers. One practice is quite common, namely, the reading by installments of one of the composites of the Passion history, either as submitted according to the Authorized Version in the Lutheran Agenda or as found in *From Bethany to Olivet* in the Revised Standard Version (Cleveland: Church World Press), which begins with the record preceding Palm Sunday. It will be a kindness to the hearer and a support for the respective sermon if the effort will be made to correlate sermon and lection, whether the text of the sermon is from the narrative itself or whether its theme has special support from the narrative although employing a different text.

Soon after a course of Lenten sermons is finished, the preacher will begin to ponder resources for the following year. This will be one of the chief methods of forestalling "that preached-out feeling," if he can review the rich treasure of meditation and teaching available for his preaching beyond what he has already treated. If his courses draw from the narrative of the Passion directly, he will find many possibilities of texts in the manifold sayings of Jesus or in the characters and incidents of the Passion history. But he will also rejoice in the resources of the epistles and their unfolding of the meaning and structure of the atonement, the "preaching of

the Cross," the contrasting pictures of cover for sin, restoration of life, bearing the burden, healing through stripes, life through death, righteousness through judgment, mercy for sin, which the epistles portray. In some years he will plan courses making use of the Old Testament forecasts and foreshadowings of Jesus' redeeming work, which evidently our Lord Himself drew upon so richly as He taught His disciples and which the apostles then employed in their letters.

But here is the Lenten series for this year! The texts are chosen, the themes are published, the hours approach. What are some basic concerns to keep in mind through all the preparation and preaching?

Let each unit of the series actually preach. Preaching always means applying the redeeming work of Jesus Christ to a goal of faith or life of the hearer. If the preacher wants to make his hearer sad over the suffering of Jesus; or if he wishes to use the Passion of our Lord as a warning against sin and evoke terrors of conscience; or if he proposes to utilize the generally quite shabby behavior of the disciples of Jesus as examples how not to treat our Lord — very well, but he has still not preached. All of these may be useful components in a sermon, but only to summon the hearer to attend to the message of the preaching. That message is always: Jesus Christ died for your sins so that you might believe in Him as Redeemer or follow Him as Lord.

What if the preaching text for the evening concerns only evil? What if it concerns only behavior to be expected of Christian hearers? What if it suggests only penitence? Isn't contrition a good thing? Aren't we supposed to preach to

bring about repentance? Certainly; all preaching is to aim at repentance. But repentance does not mean penitence. Repentance means change, turning from death to life, from little faith to stronger faith. The Law does not work repentance, if by that you mean what the New Testament means by it, the turning; at best it works the desire to turn, the wish that one could. Preaching to penitence should never end, in the hearer's mind, with his saying: "I'll not act like that"; or "I'm better than that"; or "I'll never do it again." But preaching to penitence—and it should pervade every sermon and not be a characteristic merely of Lent—should always result in the hearer's saying: "Yes, I am a sinner, without the power to change; tell me what God has done to change me." Every Christian sermon must then give the answer: God put your sin on Jesus Christ, look what He did, look and find your faith repaired, look and have the strength for life which God Himself gives. How dreadful if a sermon in Lententide, the high moment in the church's reflection on Jesus' redemptive work, doesn't direct the penitent hearer to that answer of God!

The Confessions have useful watchwords concerning this matter, which can be summarized: Law and Gospel must indeed be distinguished from each other, but they must never be separated from each other. Gospel is Gospel only to the person who is saying in his heart: "I need this, I am a sinner." But Law has its purpose only so that the hearer will say: "That pertains to me too; tell me the message of forgiveness and release." This watchword needs special enforcement, it would seem, in Lenten preaching.

The preacher must beware of the as-

sumption that the message of the Cross is basically Law, indictment for sin, the spectacle of the enormity of our sin that could produce so dreadful a sacrifice, and therefore that the real Gospel enters in only with the preaching of the resurrection of Christ. This assumption allows a preacher to postpone his Gospel until Easter Day. It may underlie some of the folk piety that struggles for sadness on Good Friday and for hilarity on Easter. (Interestingly, the ancient *Tenebrae* resists a sullen or mourning mood in Holy Week in a most salutary way.) True, the Confessions have much to say, following the cue of the Middle Ages, concerning the conviction of sin which the viewing of the Cross must bring with it. Yet the accent of the New Testament, the use to which it uniformly puts the spectacle and the message of the Cross, is that of the "setting forth" of God's plan to redeem the world through the blood of His Son. "You have killed the Prince of life" is originally not an application of the story of the Cross to hearers in Ephesus or Corinth or Rome; it was said to the men who had literally done the killing. The Old and New Testaments have incisive, even harrowing methodologies of preaching the wrath of God upon sin, on which also the Passion preacher can draw in order to leave the story of the Cross in its full focus as the act of God forgiving the sins of the world. Already the death of Christ was victory over sin, death, and the devil; through dying Christ put death to death. The resurrection itself has no meaning without the death of Christ. Paul had to make much of it against the people who denied the resurrection of the body. But in our time Paul might have to write another chapter:

"If Christ be preached that He conquered death by dying for our sins, how say some among you that there was no victory on the cross? If Christ did not die for your sins, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins." He did write that chapter, of course, Rom. 3—6, Col. 1 and 2, Gal. 3 and 4.

A difficulty adheres to the traditional homily form of preaching on the Passion history. It begins the sermon by restating at considerable length the incidents of the Passion itself. Thereupon individual lessons are drawn from it for the hearer's faith and behavior. Several subsidiary difficulties are apparent here: the magnificently restrained, journalistically apt narrative of the Gospels may expand into bizarre, artificial, sometimes distasteful and flatulent verbiage; and the unity of the sermon, contrived to produce a single and effective impact on the hearer, is exchanged for a difficult process that fatigues the hearer and lulls him into inattention. But more significant is the situation that the power in the Passion history, namely, the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, does not strike the hearer as moving him to faith or life at all. He is listening to it for the sake of listening, because he has not yet confronted the purpose to which it should move him, or the difficulties which hinder him through sin and flesh from carrying out God's will. Gospel should come after Law, not because otherwise it is no Gospel, but because the Gospel is the message that brings life for that death and recovery from that sin to which the Law alerts and against which it has leveled the indictment of God.

Another distortion which may characterize Lenten preaching is the one termed Christ-monism, that is, that the work of

Jesus Christ is portrayed as independent of Father and Spirit. Christ bears our sins, feels our needs, forgives our sins, suffers our pains, comes back into our kind of physical life, guarantees our place in heaven, wins the favor of God upon the human race, walks by our side. All of these concepts carry a load of Biblical truth. But if they fill out all of the theological picture, the very meaning of the Passion is obscured. For God sent His Son into the world. The work which Christ did and which climaxed at bitter cost on the cross was the work which God planned. Gethsemane shows Christ wrestling, as He had done in the wilderness three years before, to meet the full demand of the Father's will to undertake the redeeming work. Hence that climactic act on the cross He Himself forecasts as the "going to the Father," the culmination of the transaction which the writer to the Hebrews portrays as the bringing of the sacrifice by which the sins of the world are covered. This full accent is important in order to make clear how the atonement is redemptive. It works not simply because it is so horrible or because it is the death of the God-man. But it works because in it God Himself is at work, "God was in Christ, reconciling"; and because Jesus is obedient to Him, "unto death," to convey the full thrust of God's mercy into the dead world. Furthermore, our sharing in Christ's work is not through a feeble effort to "open our hearts" to Him, or a "surrender of ourselves" to Him. But it is through the Spirit, who is ours and who comes to us because of this very act of the atonement which the Passion of Christ narrates. The Spirit comes and does His work by reminding us of this redeeming

act, bringing these things to our remembrance, and thus turning our hearts and confirming our hearts toward faith in Him as Redeemer. Lententide sermons therefore need to be Trinitarian.

If the Gospel, the message of the atoning work of Jesus, must be at the heart of Passion preaching, does this imply that faith is its one goal and objective? Certainly much of it will be. This does not mean that the hearers have to be addressed as unbelievers. It is ludicrous for a sermon on Judas to address a Christian congregation about to receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion as traitors and sons of perdition or for the preacher to say in a sermon on Pilate, "We all have washed our hands of the death of Jesus." But the Passion record will provide many case histories of unbelief which help discern its anatomy; many instances of littleness of faith in God's own people and Christ's own disciples which have their counterpart in present-day Christians who are likewise *simul iusti et peccatores*. And then the story of God's redeeming love in the Crucified comes forth as power for growth in faith. Faith, furthermore, is never merely acceptance of a record or a doctrine but always trust in God as Father and Christ as Redeemer; and Lenten preaching can lead to many individual facets of this reach toward God—adoration and thankfulness, confidence in time of sorrow, dependence on God against the pride of self-righteousness and mere churchly piety.

But this is not to suggest that all Passion preaching will avoid the goals of behavior and of good works. When it aims to improve the Christian life of the hearers, it should avoid merely saying what it is, or

preaching Christ merely as example, or frightening the hearer into it by the reward of the wicked, or trying to create good behavior as a sort of repayment for kindness received. Rather should Lenten preaching set the tone for the preaching of the whole Christian year in which the preacher speaks the Word of Christ's redeeming work as the one means by which God stirs and moves the heart of the hearer to love others; the one means by which the flesh of the hearer is replaced with the will to serve God. Certainly the Passion history can well illumine the heart of human beings, also those close to the Cross, as subject to the flesh and weak in fruits of godly life; but it can with no turning of Biblical pages bring the full force of the atonement to bear upon the heart of the hearer as the source of the life in Christ.

Lenten preaching should be a mighty refreshment for the preacher. There can be only blessing in the discipline of gazing fixedly and with the purpose of growth on the redeeming work of Jesus Christ, and the preacher should reap this harvest first of all. But the better his preaching is, the more completely he will succeed in fixing the eyes of his people, too, on that Christ.

William H. Nes, in "Preaching in Lent" in the volume *Preaching the Christian Year* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957, Howard A. Johnson, editor), has general comments from the Episcopal point of view and interesting suggestions for the Sundays through Judica. Frederick C. Grant, in the article "Preaching in Holy Week," feels that worship needs more stress than the preaching that is "lectures on theological topics."

Fred H. Lindemann, in *The Sermon and the Propers* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958, Vol. II), writes interestingly of "The Lenten Season" ending with Laetare, and Passiontide as comprising particularly the last 14

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days of Lent. His assumption seems valid (p. 82): "While the Propers of Judica and Holy Week impress upon us the enormity of our sin by holding before us the tremendous Sacrifice and the ugliness of our sins in the light of the Sufferer's holiness, a quiet joy in our redemption should pervade our worship, even on Good Friday."

Before planning a series of Lenten sermons, or shortly after concluding one, the preacher will find it helpful to read a monograph like Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the*

Cross (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956); or a volume of sermonic studies like G. Stoekhardt, *Passionspredigten* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), models of restraint in over-elaborating clinical detail. One of the finest antidotes for the vice of exclusively moralizing or penitential preaching is still C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* (trans. W. H. T. Dau, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1929).

St. Louis, Mo.

OUR CONTRIBUTORS

MARTIN H. FRANZMANN, professor, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo.

MATTHIAS SCHULTZ, pastor at Berlin-Steglitz and Kirchenrat of the Evangelisch-Lutherisch (Altlu-therische) Kirche

MEINERT H. GRUMM, missionary of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod, serving in South India

RICHARD R. CAEMMERER, professor, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo.