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Herbert E. Hohenstein
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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HOMILETICS

Outlines on the Synodical Conference Gospels, Second Series

By HERBERT E. HOHENSTEIN

SEXAGESIMA SUNDAY

AMOS 8:11, 12

The question raised by these words is this:

Could We Have a Famine?

It's not likely in our land of plenty. We don't merely have enough in America, we have huge surpluses. In fact, our very abundance is responsible for a serious, even critical, economic problem—the problem brought on by overproduction.

I. Prosperity can result in serious famine

A. Take the case of Israel.

1. Their wealth and material luxury caused them to forget God and His ways. Cf. Amos 6:4 ff. Somehow these Hebrews forgot the admonition of Moses to their desert-dwelling forefathers (Deut. 6:10-15). God was sending a famine because these fat, sleek, fun-loving Israelites had allowed their bellies to become their gods.

2. And what a famine it would be! A famine of the Word. Like drunkards they would stagger and reel up and down the length and breadth of their land seeking just a morsel, a crumb of bread, a drop of water, just a single word from the Lord's lips. But they wouldn't find it.

3. And what a fate they suffered! Since God and His Word are inseparable, when that Word departed, so did the Lord. And when God goes, so does all gladness of heart, body, and life. God went from Israel and Israel went into captivity. In fact, the 10 tribes, to whom Amos spoke these words of the text, actually went into oblivion. We don't know what happened to them after the

Assyrians conquered them and carried them off in 722 B.C.

B. Could the same happen to us?

1. Like Israel we too are fat, sleek, and fun-filled. Israel allowed fun and goods to become her god and in so doing also ignored the needs of those less blessed (Amos 6:6). Instead of pouring the oil of help over the wounds of the poor and needy, Israel poured perfume over herself. She had houses of ivory while the needy lay in cold, hunger, and misery at her doorstep.

2. Can the same be said of us? As you live in your comfortable homes, does the thought ever come to you that millions of your fellow men are trying to catch a few precious winks on the cold earth with practically no cover but the stars? And what are you doing about it? Ours seems to be a land more concerned about body odor than about the stench of sin! And while we perfume our clean and well-fed bodies, does the thought ever run through our minds: "When was the last time I poured the oil of concern, comfort, and help over the wounds of the poor and the needy?" Of Israel God said: "They drink wine in bowls and anoint themselves with chief ointments, but they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph" (Amos 6:6). Must He say the same of us?

3. And notice, it is the affliction of Joseph. This concern for people's needs was to begin at home. (a) How difficult it is to be loving at home. Somehow we find it much easier to practice patience, courtesy, kindness, outside the home. At home we put our worst foot forward. (b) That's because home

is the place where we can relax, let down our hair, and be our true crabby and loveless selves. Is it? (c) It's difficult to see Christ in our dear ones. They are often so unlike Christ in their conduct. Yet that's what it takes to practice love—the ability to see Jesus in people, even and especially in our loved ones.

C. It could be happening to us. Familiarity breeds contempt, they say. Could this also be true of our relation to God's Word? Most of us have been feeding on the Bread of life so long that perhaps it has lost some of its original freshness and flavor. We know it's supposed to taste good, to thrill and excite us, to tingle our taste buds. But it doesn't. Has the old, old story become just that—old? Do we either force the food down or eat very irregularly or not at all? Too often the appetite is dull and listless. And God takes the bread of His Word from people who aren't eating it.

II. *There is no famine when people are eating*

A. There's only one solution to this problem. Not less eating—but more—more hearing of the wonderful Word about Jesus, who was crucified and then burst the bonds of death that God might loose us from our sins and take us to eternal joy.

B. We have to feast more upon this Christ in the Holy Supper as we take into ourselves the body that was broken on the cross and then raised again to bring us pardon and life, the blood that was poured out to purchase our favor with an offended God.

C. For, you see, the hearing and eating of this living Word, Christ Jesus, is God's way of helping you to a better appetite for that Bread of life. Eat well, and there won't be a famine.

QUINQUAGESIMA SUNDAY

JER. 8:4-9

Whether we admit it or not, we're joiners and imitators. We hate to be thought of as

odd and peculiar. Yet that is precisely the way we behave every day. For every day we sin, and sin is an oddity. That's what this passage tells us as it commands

Don't Be Odd

I. *Learn a lesson from your fellow humans*

A. Doesn't a fallen man rise again? Unless he is knocked unconscious or prevented from rising by broken limbs or other serious injury, the first thing a fallen man does is to get up again. It is unthinkable and absolutely unnatural, it is just plain odd for him to stay down when he can get up. But Israel was acting contrary to nature. It was acting odd. Israel fell into sin and stayed there. It didn't get up. It began to think and live as if lying down were more natural than standing up. Is that the way it is with us? When you fall, do you rise again or do you find it so pleasant, so free from strain and sacrifice, so comfortable, lying on your back, lying in your lovable sins, that you don't feel like rising and walking God's paths again? Remember you don't win races lying on your back. And it is a race you're running, and your very life is the prize, your eternal life.

B. If a man takes a wrong turn, does he retrace his steps? Who ever heard of someone turning down the wrong street or road, discovering his error, and then consciously continuing in the wrong direction. Normal people correct themselves and get on the right road again. Yet Israel was acting abnormally. She took the wrong turn. She left God's path and turned down the road of sin, the road to individual and national ruin. And it isn't that she didn't know it. God kept telling her of her wrong and fatal turn through His thundering prophets, but she behaved abnormally; she didn't turn back.

C. In fact, she even refused to admit that she had fallen or taken the wrong turn. Jeremiah says, "They hold fast to deceit"; they live a lie; they talk and fool themselves into thinking that they are standing in right-

cousness when they are really lying in sin. They act as if they are walking God's path when they are traveling Satan's road. They allow their routine and habitual performance of religious rites to make them believe that they are truly religious, but it is all a lie. Worse still, they know it's a lie yet resent and hate and kill the prophet who calls their religious bluff.

1. Is there a lesson here for us? Could what we trust so much in—our religious rites, our churchgoing, our communing and praying, our Bible reading, our giving, our work for the church—could all of this be like a faulty parachute? We are counting on these religious rites to prove to God, people, and ourselves that we are truly religious when we aren't, when our weeklong lives give evidence that our religion is merely rites and not righteousness. We can't count on that kind of parachute. It won't open, it won't save us on the Day of Judgment. Jesus warns of the judgment words "I never knew you!" And to whom will they be said? To people who had thrown devils out of others, prophesied in the Savior's name, and had done many mighty works! Can we match that record? It makes all of our church work look rather puny and ridiculous by comparison. Still it wasn't enough, for rites never are. Daily righteousness is expected.

2. Be careful! It is so easy to become *self-righteous*, to think righteousness can be found in anything we ourselves do. The greatest sin of all, the only damning sin, besides despair of God's mercy, is to think you aren't a sinner and therefore need no Savior. This is like knowing you have an ulcer yet stubbornly cramming down all the spicy foods you can and refusing to be under your doctor's care just to try to prove you have no ulcer or to dodge the ugly fact that you do. In the end, you suffer all the more for such foolish self-deception. Don't practice such foolish and fatal deception with

regard to your sin, for you have fallen, you have taken the wrong turn. The deepest fall, the only fatal wrong turn, is to think and live as if you haven't fallen or turned aside. For such deception insists that Christ has been wrongly named—calling Him Jesus, Savior, was a mistake and misnomer—at least as far as you are concerned.

D. Israel turned aside, and God was waiting for them to admit it (v.6). This is our God who is described in the familiar prayer "O God, who art always more ready to hear than we to ask."

1. How true this was for Israel. His people had sinned and grieved God. But He kept waiting, kept listening for them to admit it but they did not. God was listening in vain.

2. And does He still—does He still listen in vain to our prayers that never get thought or said? Does He have to shake His head over you and say: "I can't understand it? Why doesn't he open his heart or lips to Me? Does he enjoy his misery? Doesn't he know that his problems could be solved and the burden lifted or made lighter if he would just convert his cares into prayers? Why doesn't he obey My Son's command and pray: 'Father, forgive me my sins?' Can it be that he is stubbornly unwilling to pray the other half of that prayer: 'as I forgive those who sin against me?' Why do I listen so much in vain and in silence? Perhaps prayer is more of a burden to him than a precious privilege. Perhaps I have given him so much goods and gladness and shielded him so much from adversity that he doesn't feel the need to pray anymore." Is this what God must say over us?

E. Israel acted abnormally. Do we? When we take the wrong turn, when we leave the straight and narrow road of righteousness for the broad and crooked paths of sin, do we turn back? It isn't that we don't know we are headed in the wrong direction. The tragedy is that we do know we are going the

wrong way yet still stubbornly go it because it is "fun" or seems "easier" or gives promise of "riches" and "success" and "glory." Isn't it tragic that we are far more conscientious and zealous in avoiding detours and wrong turns on a highway than we are in our Christian life? Don't be odd; when you take the wrong turn, turn back again.

II. *Learn a lesson from the animal kingdom*

A. This is what God was telling Israel. Israel turned to sin like a horse charging into battle. This is the picture in v. 6, a picture of unrestrained sin. Men give their evil habits free rein; they exercise no discipline, no self-restraint. Certainly as we think of the many times we have been far more joyous and bold and willing in our sin than in our holiness; as we think of the many times we have behaved like horses, we are glad for the Lamb on whom God laid all our sins, Jesus the slain and risen One, Jesus our Savior.

B. This is what God was telling Israel. "Go to the birds, you wise people, and learn a lesson from them. The birds know when to come and when to go, and they always act in keeping with that knowledge. They do the normal thing and obey that impulse. But you, my wiser people, do not. You know what is right and yet refuse to do it. Like the birds, you, too, know your migratory laws. You know when to come—come to someone's defense or aid, come to Me in prayer and worship and praise. You know when to go—go and flee from sinful, seducing people and wicked ways. Like the birds, you, too, know when to come and to go, but unlike the birds you don't act in keeping with that knowledge."

C. So God spoke to Israel. Does He still have to talk this way to us? Our pricked conscience should say that He does.

D. What is the solution? The text says, "Don't be odd!" Yet we fall into sin; we do take the wrong turn, and unlike the birds, we don't obey the impulses God has planted

in our hearts. What is the solution? Christ! It is because we do so often fall that Jesus fell under the crushing load of a cross on the way to Calvary, there to die for the pardon of all our falls. It is because we so often turn aside from God's paths that Christ turned His face toward Jerusalem and walked all the way to the cross that our sinful turnings might be forgiven. It is because we don't behave like the birds and obey instincts of the Spirit's promptings that the Lord sent us that Christ who assures us that He gathers us under His wings for protection from death, hell, and wrath even as a hen her chicks. What wings? Why the protection of His arms, stretched and extended on a cross. The more you think about the fact of your forgiveness in Christ, the more you remember that He died and rose again so that your sins might fall from your back forever, that you might rise to eternal glory, the less you will fall into sin, and the more you will rise to righteousness.

INVOCAVIT SUNDAY

GEN. 22:1-14

This is a story about

Abraham, God, and You

I. *Abraham*

A. "What's in a name?" Shakespeare once asked this question. The answer? There is plenty in a name. At least there is plenty in the name of Abraham. It means "father of a mighty nation."

1. It seemed quite a foolish name. Why? Because when God promised Abraham that he would have descendants like the stars and the sands on the seashore and then sealed that promise by giving him his new name, Abraham was 90 years old, and Sarah, his wife, almost the same. Could a 90-year-old couple become the progenitors of a great nation? It was all so unreasonable that Sarah couldn't keep from laughing about it.

But not Abraham! He was just foolish enough to take God at His word. And he wasn't disappointed.

2. Yet now it seemed God was going to deprive Abraham of his new name, his name that gave such promise for the future and gladdened the aged patriarch's declining days. God had kept His promise and given Abraham a son. Yet here came the unreasonable command, this cruel order: "Abraham, kill your only son." "O God," Abraham must have thought, "what are You demanding? Kill Isaac? Why if he dies, so does my present joy and future hope. And so does Your promise. How can You make me the father of a great people if I cease to be a father of this son? How can I continue as Abraham? The name would be only a hollow and cruel mockery. Will You give me another son or raise this sacrificed son from the dead? Of course, he is my only child. You know it as well as I. You know as well as I the great sacrifice You're commanding me to make. Please, Lord, don't demand so much."

B. And Abraham obeyed. (V.3)

1. Yes, Abraham obeyed all right. But it must have been only after a fierce struggle. We sometimes glorify, idolize, and deify these Biblical heroes, these giants of faith and righteousness, to the point that they cease to be human. God commands, "Abraham, go kill your son." And Abraham rose to kill him. It was as simple as that! But it wasn't. Of course, Abraham was a great man of faith, but he was also a man. It is inconceivable that he didn't first go through inner turmoil and agony before he could go to sacrifice his son.

a. There is a challenge in this. The challenge to do as Abraham did in our obedience to God's difficult and unreasonable commands, the challenge to stop excusing ourselves from this obedience by saying, "I am not an Abra-

ham, a giant, a hero, a supersaint, as he was; I am just little 'me,' so much weaker and prone to sin." Is this a handy excuse for not going all out for a righteous life?

b. There is also a comfort here. If even the great Abraham had to fight and suffer to obey God's orders, then you should not condemn yourself or despair over your intense inner struggles to obey God's will.

2. Abraham obeyed God. And why? We find our answer in the Book of Hebrews (Heb. 11:17-19). Abraham obeyed because his faith in God's power knew no bounds. God had promised to make him the father of a mighty nation, and if keeping that promise meant raising Isaac from the dead, God could and would do just that. Abraham believed that, and therefore he obeyed the command to sacrifice.

II. God

A. Was testing Abraham. (V.1)

1. How strong is Abraham's faith? Is it strong enough to believe that God can still keep His promise to make him the father of a mighty nation even though Isaac were dead? Does Abraham actually believe that God can give another son or restore the slain Isaac? Abraham passed the test. He did believe that God could do the impossible!

2. How strong is Abraham's love? Whom does he treasure more—his only son or his only God? Would he care for God enough to give the very best? The answer is given in vv. 11, 12. Not even the love for his only child was greater than the love that took God at His word. It is small wonder, then, that Scripture tells us that Abraham's unquestioned acceptance of God's promise, Abraham's faith, was counted as his righteousness.

B. Yet He was not giving an order which He Himself was unwilling to carry out. For God indeed did what He commanded Abra-

ham to do. See how striking are the parallels.

1. God tested Abraham by commanding him to sacrifice his only son; God gives His only Son because man has the temerity to test Him. That's what our sins really are—testing God. We test Him by our unbelief. God gives a command, promises a blessing to those who obey and a curse to those who don't. Yet we test that command by thinking, "I can get by. I'm the one exception. It won't really happen." We test God by our doubts.

2. Abraham offered Isaac on a mountain. Tradition tells us that this Mount Moriah is the very hill on which Jesus was crucified for our sin.

3. It was an only son in both cases. Had Abraham but known fully, he could never have remonstrated with God. For God could have answered: "I, too, know just how you feel. For you see, this Son, whom I send to die for you and for all men, is My *only* Son."

4. Abraham and his son were together on their mountain! And God was in Christ, reconciling the world. But God forsook His Son on Calvary that your sins might be eternally separated from you as far as East is from West. God forsook His Son on Calvary that He might never leave you, not even when you leave this life.

5. God was testing Abraham in his sacrifice of Isaac. God sacrificed His Son that all our testings, our sins and unbelief, might be pardoned.

6. God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. It was not an order that moved God to give His Son as your Pardon-Procureur and Heaven-Bringer. It was love, love so great and deep that it cost God His very life for you!

7. Abraham had a substitute for his son (v. 13). God had none for His. There was no substitute ram for God's Lamb, Christ.

Christ went through with it. He died. He had to if you are to have pardon and heaven. The glad fact is that He died and rose again, and the forgiveness you need and the heaven you hope for are not finger-crossed wishes but cross-assured certainties, certainties assured by the cross of Jesus.

III. *And you!*

What shall we say about you? Just this. When God tests you as He did Abraham, may Abraham's faith and obedience be yours. And they can! You, too, can become an Abraham as more and more you remember that the Son sacrificed upon the mountain is not Isaac but Jesus, Jesus, who died and then rose again that God might pardon your repeated failures of His tests, might forgive your repeated tests of Him.

REMINISCERE SUNDAY

Ex. 33:17-23

These words tell us what happened

When Moses Met God in the Tent

I. *Moses always met God outside the camp* (Ex. 33:7)

A. There was a reason for this (Ex. 33:1-3). God's patience with the stubborn and straying Israelites was at the breaking point. For the sake of His oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, He would send the Hebrews on their way to Palestine. But His only contact with His people was through Moses in tent meetings outside the camp, away from the stubborn and stiff-necked Israelites.

B. Things are wonderfully different in the New Testament. St. John writes: "The Word became flesh and *tented* among us." Right in our midst, in the midst of all our burdens, sin, and death. No tenting of God outside our camp here, outside the camp of our world with all of its distresses and evils. In our midst He tented for 33 long years that we might have fellowship with Him forever.

II. *Moses recognized the futility of any venture without God (Ex. 33:12-15)*

A. This was a good insight on his part. He realized that even Palestine with all of its milk and honey without God's presence would be a barren and joyless place.

B. Do we have that same conviction? If the Lord should say to us, "Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey, but I won't go with you," would we reply, "That's all right, Lord—just so we have the milk and honey, the goods and good times, the people to love us and serve us"?

III. *He received the promise of rest*

A. God told Moses, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (Ex. 33:14). It was through Joshua, of course, that God kept this promise.

B. Even so it is through Joshua that He keeps a similar promise to us. Through Joshua, the Son of Mary (the Greek is Jesus) God gives us the rest of heaven, Jesus, the second Joshua, who was so restless in His ministry of healing and love, Jesus, who literally worked Himself to the grave and then came back again that we might have the rest of heaven.

IV. *The Lord informed him that He knew his name (33:17)*

A. Now this doesn't simply mean that God had an intellectual awareness of Moses. God's knowledge of people always results in something, in His loving them, guiding them, helping them.

B. It is the same for us. God knows you by name.

1. What a comfort! How many times did you sit down or stand up yesterday? Did you count them? God knows your "down-sitting and your uprising," says the Hebrew poet. What a comfort!

2. What a warning! You can't pull the shades on the Lord and perform any private sins. He knows!

V. *God disclosed His name (Ex. 33:19)*

A. This was the ultimate and final answer to Moses' question at the burning bush (Ex. 3:13, 14). "Who are You?" he asked! Did the question take God by surprise? His only answer was: "I will be what I will be." Here in our text God completes the sentence. "I will be gracious upon whom I will be gracious." This is God's name—Grace. Grace is God's name, the grace the Lord showed in electing the despised and wretched Hebrews to be His people (Deut. 7:6 ff.), the grace He showed in guiding them, putting up with their grumblings and stubbornness in the desert, the grace He showed in sending manna and quail from heaven instead of His merited thunderbolts.

B. It's in Jesus that God discloses His name to us. St. John tells us Jesus is God's tent in our flesh, and it is in this tent that God reveals His name to us, the name Savior.

VI. *The Lord showed him His back (Ex. 33:20-23)*

A. Moses couldn't behold God's face. It would have meant death if he had beheld it.

B. Yet it is by looking on God's face that we live. We look upon the face of God in Jesus Christ, that smiling and forgiving face, that face lined with the sorrows and trials of life, that face cold and lifeless in death's cruel rigor, that face pulsing with new life again! We look upon that face of God in Christ and we live forever.

VII. *God covered him (Ex. 33:22)*

A. By this cover of His hand God spared Moses from certain death.

B. By the cover of His Son, God spares us from eternal death. It is not with a hand that God covers us but with His own dear Son; Christ is the covering for our sins. (1 John 2:2)

Richmond Heights, Mo.