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HOMILETICS

Outlines on a Series of Free Texts

(The outlines for all four Sundays of Advent are furnished by the Rev. James W. Mack, pastor of Salem Lutheran Church, Florissant, Mo. The suggested topic for the whole series is "Moving Forward in Advent.")

FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

JOSHUA 3:1-6

Problem and Goal: In this day of amazing technological advances of man the challenge to live and work as people who are led by God increases daily. The temptation beckons to turn to other resources for power, strength, and guidance and to ease God out of that central, vital position of being God in our lives. The goal of the sermon is to help the hearer see and understand that his personal spiritual health and growth, as well as any contribution of service to the kingdom of God, is entirely dependent upon letting God occupy this vital, central position. — The sermon relates to the theme for the day with its call for a review of the hearer's position in relation to God. The general thought of both Epistle and Gospel is the reawakening of the child of God to an awareness of the fact that the great desire of our Savior is to enter into the hearts and lives of people and be their Lord.

Introduction and Central Thought: As we meditate upon the text before us today, we note that the situation of God's people in the days of Joshua was similar to our own. The officers prepared the people for the crossing of the Jordan by reminding them: "Ye have not passed this way heretofore." The unknown also lies before us in the next 12 months. We cannot look beyond the impenetrable veil of the future and know in advance

what joys and sorrows, personal problems and trials, are in store for us. The temptation is great to rely upon human resources for direction, strength, and energy for the future and thereby to succumb to the ancient sin of removing God from our lives and setting up another god in His place. Our text for today brings into focus the truth that only with God in the center of our lives dare we move ahead. For the children of God the Advent call today is:

Let God Lead You

I. Stop and reflect

A. Vv. 1, 2: The host of Israel stopped for three days at the Jordan to prepare themselves for the great event of the crossing. A pause at this point in our lives is equally imperative before we proceed.

B. Milestones as great as the beginning of a new church year call for a review of our past life as well as preparation and redirection for the future.

C. Take the time to reflect and to ask yourself the question: Who or what is it that guides, moves, and strengthens me? Have I let someone or something other than God occupy this all-important position? Cf. the First Commandment and Gen. 3:1 (in the serpent's question as to God's right to occupy this position is the beginning of sin).

D. There can only be weakness and disappointment if I say, "He restoreth my soul," of anything or anyone except God.

II. Look and listen to your God

A. God points His people to His covenant promise and to the visible evidence of His presence and promise, the ark of the covenant (vv. 3, 4). They are to place their trust in Him and follow His lead into the unknown territory. In Word and Sacraments God gives us the assurance that He is with us always. We know that all His promises have been fulfilled in our Lord Jesus and in the new covenant, sealed with the blood of Christ, "shed for the remission of your sins." He would have us daily remember our Baptism and be reassured that we are His children, called, redeemed, and made whole by His Spirit.

B. God is very specific in His promises. "Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that have I given unto you." This was His promise to Joshua, and the leader of Israel could count on what God had said (1:3). At the beginning of this new church year we can trust and rely upon God's loving guidance, direction, and blessing for every step of the way in the days ahead, as we turn to Word and Sacrament for pardon, peace, and strength.

III. Go forward in the Lord's strength

A. Israel was encouraged to move forward because "the Lord will do wonders among you." (V. 5)

B. We go forward as people among whom God has done the greatest wonders. We are redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ and cleansed from sin by His sacrifice upon the cross. We have been called to be children of God and made whole by the marvelous power of the Spirit of God, working through Word and Sacrament.

C. Go forward then in full confidence that He who has made you His own will be with you with His almighty power and direct your steps on paths of peace. Therefore let Him occupy the center of your life, and feed daily upon His Word. (Ps. 119:105; John 6:35 ff.)

SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

1 COR. 1:4-9

Problem and Goal: The Propers of the Second Sunday in Advent have an eschatological accent. While the Introit and Collect refer primarily to the first coming of the Savior, the Gradual and Gospel point to His final coming. The Epistle reminds us that Christ is the promised universal Savior.—The text relates to the Propers by answering the question: How can we be sure of remaining in saving faith until the end? As we are reminded today of the certainty of the second advent of Christ, we want assurance that we shall be found "in Christ" when He comes again or when we are called to meet Him. Basically the problem is one of fear. God is faithful, but will we fail in some way to hold fast to the promises God has given? The text directs us to turn ever and again to the good news of the grace of God in Christ toward us in order to live without fear until the day of His second coming.

Introduction and Central Thought: World War II was fought to guarantee people, among other things, "freedom from fear." But if our tension-ridden, pill-consuming generation is any criterion, we lost that war. Homes, families, businesses, and governments today are riddled with fear and tension of every kind. Books, magazines, and newspaper columns are written in profusion as antidotes for fear and relief of tension. But multiply as fast as they will, these remedies cannot allay the burgeoning specter of fear. There is not only dread of the destruction of the lives of hundreds of millions of people in atomic fire, but there are also smaller fears that beset us and disrupt the joy and peace of our lives. They nibble away at the fabric of our serenity like termites corrupting the soundness of wood, all unseen and unsuspected, from the inside. The text for this morning directs us to look outside ourselves and to the good news of God's grace toward

us in Christ Jesus, for the assurance that God will see us safely through this life to the day of the final appearing of His Son. At the outset of this new church year our Lord directs us to:

Live Without Fear

I. Because God has been at work

A. He prepared from eternity for us the "gift" of real freedom from fear in His plan to redeem us freely, by grace, in the sending of His Son Jesus to be our Savior.

B. He brought that plan to fruition in the life and death of Christ. The Savior's perfect fulfillment of God's Law is credited to us and supplies what we lacked because of our complete failure and inability to conform to God's holy will. Our Lord's sacrifice upon the cross was in full payment for our sins and guilt in God's sight.

C. He brought the good news of this gift to the world through the apostolic witness.

II. Because God is still at work

A. He is preserving, making holy, and enriching the lives of His people. (1) The real comfort of the Gospel is the assurance that our salvation is by grace, through faith in the redeeming work of Christ and does not depend upon the feeble, futile efforts of man to justify himself in God's sight. (2) God enables us through the power of His Spirit to witness this faith to others.

B. In all that He does God is utterly faithful and dependable. (1) At all times, under every circumstance of life, the desire of God is to free us from the paralyzing grip of sin, assuring us daily of our forgiveness through His Word and Sacraments. (2) God lets us experience the blessings of our fellowship with His Son.

Conclusion: Since our gracious, heavenly Father has by the Savior's life, death, and resurrection redeemed us to be His children and called us into fellowship with Him, our lives are in His keeping both in time and in eternity and nothing shall pluck us out of His

hand. God supplies all that we need. He, in Christ, covers and fills all that we lack. His holy desire is to enrich, to prosper our lives, under the patient guidance and in the strength of His Holy Spirit as He reaches us with Word and Sacrament. In all of this, God is utterly faithful and dependable. By a faithful use of these means of grace and firm trust in His promises, we can live our lives without fear.

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

ROM. 2:12-16

Problem and Goal: The Propers for the Third Sunday in Advent provide fitting background for the text under consideration. The Introit speaks of our moderation and self-control; the Collect petitions God to "lighten the darkness of our hearts"; the Gradual implores God to "shine forth." The Epistle points out that God alone knows the inner workings of men's dark hearts and therefore alone is capable of rendering just judgment with regard to their lives. The Gospel poses the question: "What did people see when they heard John the Baptizer preach? Were they attracted merely by the externals of his life?" In this setting the text deals with the problem of confusing morality and Christianity. Both seem to aim at good behavior. But there is more to the matter. To lead a moral life a person sets up his own standard or ethic. For him Christ becomes only an example which he tries to follow but never succeeds in reaching. Christianity indeed holds before us the life of Christ as the perfect example of human behavior, but by the "good news," i.e., the Gospel, it assures us, above all, that God through Christ was redeeming the world and that through the regenerating power of the Spirit, working through Word and Sacrament, God actually changes the hearts of men and enables them to live truly moral lives acceptable in His sight.

Introduction and Central Thought: It is customary periodically to measure the growth of children particularly. Perhaps our parents had us stand against a wall or a doorframe and record our height. Six months or a year later the measurement was made again to see how much we had grown. In this Advent season we look again at ourselves to see whether we measure up to God's expectations. As a standard or rule, against which we might measure our performance, the Lord in our text offers us Himself. But more than this, He offers us Himself as the "living Bread," the "nourishing Vine," the "Fountain of living water," to enable and empower us in life and work to "measure up to Christ!" God probes down into the darkness of human hearts and lives and exposes the complete decay of our natural self in order to heal and restore us in the strength and holiness of Christ. Only thus are we enabled to serve Him and stand before Him on the Day of Judgment. God wants us to

Measure Up to Christ

I. We shall not succeed

A. If we look to ourselves. (1) We are sinners (v. 12) and therefore dead (cf. Rom. 6:23 ff.). (2) We cannot stand before Him who will "judge us." (V. 16)

B. If we compare ourselves with the people around us. The "ethic" and "morality" of the community or society in which we live is no better than we are. "The best in the worst of us and the worst in the best of us"—neither can pass before the eye of God's judgment.

C. If we remain under the Law. (1) The Law will mercilessly expose us for what we are, i. e., imperfect before the holiness of God, shattered, broken—like a choice piece of china—and unable to mend ourselves. (2) The Law can only produce a moral "code" to regulate the conduct of people, but is not able to raise them to a more godly level. The Law provides for a "closed en-

vironment," in which no real change can ever take place in your personality. This is a deadly circle. This is "the strength of sin." (1 Cor. 15:56)

II. Christ shall be our measure

A. He alone can show us the depth of our depravity, v. 13, (1) by His perfect life (1 Peter 2:22; Luke 23:41); (2) by His death for us. (Luke 23:34)

B. He alone can heal and restore us, v. 13, (1) He is the only Way to the Father, cf. John 14:6; (2) He is the Light to dispel the darkness of our sin, cf. John 13:46 and the Gospel for the day; (3) He alone opened the way for us to be connected to the living power of God (Word and Sacrament). (John 14:33)

C. He alone will judge the ultimate measure of our life and growth. (1) Christ, who has redeemed us from sin, becomes our Judge at the Last Day, v. 16; (2) We shall be measured by all that He has spoken as well as by all that we have done. (V. 13; cf. John 12:48)

Conclusion: Such a Savior, who appears before us in the Word, not only in the humility and weakness of His humanity but also in the full strength and power of His godliness and Deity, in whom both the Law and the Gospel meet, that Savior can enable us to measure up to Christ! He alone connects us with the power of God's Spirit, who supplies our daily need in full; makes up all that we lack; pours light into our hearts; "opens our understanding," and bridges the gap that separates us from God.

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT

1 JOHN 1:1-4

Problem and Goal: The relationship of the Propers for the Fourth Sunday in Advent to the text of the sermon is a close one. The Introit speaks of the revelation of God in the

created world around us; the Collect, of God as the powerful Helper of His people; the Gradual shows God is not remote but "available" to men. The Epistle for the day stresses the nearness of the Lord and the peace of God which sustains us. The Gospel presents the witness of John the Baptizer to Christ as Lord. The text permits us to attack the problem of an inadequate concept of what witnessing for Christ is. Is it only something for professional church workers, pastors, missionaries? A job, a task, which the ordinary Christian is ill-prepared to do? One of these modern inventions of the organized church or denominational body? These ideas must be corrected. The goal is to help the hearer in his thinking about witnessing and to let him see this activity of sharing Christ and extending the fellowship of those who live and work under the love of the Savior, as the life and breath of Christians, as an irrepressible expression of our faith, and the source of our joy and happiness. To "break the living bread" of the Gospel and to distribute this to others, this is real living!

Introduction and Central Thought: We would certainly rebel and protest if a law were passed that Christmas could be celebrated only by professionals, by those who wear the Santa Claus suits, or stand on the street corners ringing little bells, or take the children upon their laps to hear their Christmas wishes. "Christmas is for everybody to enjoy," we would say, "and no one can restrict the celebration, the festivities, and the joy of this season to only a few favored people of the community." How very odd then that we who would object most strenuously to such a restriction, should have imposed upon ourselves a limitation even more strange and unusual by relegating the greatest joy of the Christian life to a fortunate few. I speak of the joy of "letting other people in" on the peace, the forgiveness, the security and

strength we have in Christ as our Redeemer. I speak of sharing God's great Gift to us and the fellowship we have with God, His Son, and one another.

For this reason we ask today that you

Join Us in Witness

I. Our witness is a testimony of "the Life of all ages" (vv. 1, 2)

A. Witnessing to God's love in Christ is not a "seasonal" practice.

B. Witnessing involves revealing to others the unchanging God of justice, love, and mercy.

II. Our witness is a testimony of personal faith (v. 3)

A. Our witness is just that, "our" witness, (1) to what we were by nature, Eph. 2:3; (2) to what God has done for us, v. 3; cf. 2 Cor. 5:17, 18; (3) to what God continues to do for us, v. 3: "Our fellowship is with the Father." (1 Peter 1:5)

B. Because God does not only deal with people en masse. (Acts 2:47)

III. Our witness is the unrestrained joy of sharing God in Christ with others (v. 4)

A. When we experience this joy, all the restraints our nature would employ to silence our testimony become ineffective: (1) lack of theological background; (2) "need the right situation, the right time, to witness." What better time than this season?

B. We are compelled by the Spirit of God to share Christ. "The love of Christ constraineth us." (2 Cor. 5:14)

Conclusion: God in His Word reveals Himself to us. We behold ourselves as living members of the body of Christ, reaching out to bring and hold others close to the Savior! Witnessing becomes a joy for all to share, and more than a duty or privilege for a favored few.