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## Homiletics

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# HOMILETICS

## *Introduction*

During their hours of discussion concerning the following texts the coauthors of these homiletical studies soon recognized that any attempt to bring together all of the divergent concerns of the group's members into one grand synthesis would result in certain losses in richness and variety. We chose, instead, to submit materials made up of four *different* kinds of resources available for the preaching of each text, four fairly distinct vantage points from which the text may be viewed. These four vantage points, or contexts, are not mutually exclusive, nor are they exhaustive, but they do represent individual points of view. We give none of them any particular preference; they may be used singly or in combination, depending on the preaching predilections of the individual pastor.

The textual contexts which concern us include the following: (1) The *historical* context, which is concerned with the historical event described in the text and the use the writer of the text makes of that historical event, as well as his reason for writing about it in the first place. This includes the frank recognition that the writer of the text did not share our Lutheran homiletical concerns when he wrote. (2) The *pericopal* context, which deals with the reasons, if any are known, why this particular text was chosen for this particular day in the church year and how it relates to the propers and the theme for the day. (3) The *psychological* context—using the term "psychological" in a broad sense—which is interested in how the text portrays the experiential dilemmas of man's relation to God and man, assuming that the characters in the text in some way do speak to modern conflicts. (4) The *Christological* context, which recognizes that since the New Testament views the entire Old Testament Christologically, it is legiti-

mate for the Christian homiletician to draw typological parallels between the life of the text's hero, David, and David's greater Son, as well as to recognize an organic continuity between David and Christ.

We deliberately suggest no unified, extensive sermon outline that would bring together all of these textual concerns, partly out of recognition that we probably could not fully agree on one anyway, but more importantly so as not to infringe on the unique resources of the individual pastor as he senses the peculiar needs of his own congregation. The outlines given at the end of each section are totally individual in character. They come from the historical, the psychological, and the pericopal contexts respectively. They are intended to illustrate how a man might preach the text from these distinct vantage points. As such they do not necessarily make use of all the material available in the introductory sections.

To emphasize the obvious, there is no one "right" way to preach these texts. It is a truism that each pastor preaches in terms of his own subjective experience. What follows represents four rather divergent subjective experiences of the objective truth conveyed by these texts. Our approaches to them may or may not have relevance to you, depending on *your* experience in the ministry and your goals in preaching.

## *General Comments on the Texts*

1. *Historical Context:* These three texts come from two distinct accounts of the history of Israel. The first is found in the Chronicler's history (comprising 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah); the last two are found in the Deuteronomic history (Joshua—2 Kings), the historical corpus which carries out the principles enunciated in the Book of Deuteronomy as to the con-

sequences of faithfulness and unfaithfulness to the covenant.

2. *Pericopal Context:* These texts were chosen for pre-Lent, the season that marks a dramatic shift in the church year from the reverent joy of the period after Epiphany to the penitential sorrow of Lent. While somber in tone, these Sundays are a definite part of the prelude to Easter. At one period in history this season was a time for a last-minute preparation of the catechumens. Hence the propers that originated in this period consistently have the flavor of enlistment, of an invitation to participate in the ongoing and consuming activity of the church.

3. *Psychological Context:* These texts can be seen as a sort of case study of David, vignettes illustrating critical points in his life. In them David can be seen at the beginning of his reign, young and eager; at the height of his power, invincible yet unreflective and vulnerable; and finally at the end of his days summing up what he has learned in his charge to Solomon. In all of them David comes across as a vividly human individual whose triumphs and pitfalls we share.

4. *Christological Context:* These texts do not readily strike the reader as being specifically Messianic. The promises no doubt were originally thought to be fulfilled in Solomon. But Israel's faith and experience looked for continual blessing to the house of David beyond Solomon. The New Testament witness would testify to the fulfillment in Christ and His kingly rule of all for which Israel longed.

## SEPTUAGESIMA

### 1 CHRONICLES 17:15-20

#### 1. *Historical Context*

David had come to a point in his life when he was able to live in a house, and he wanted to build one for God. As a typical ancient Semite he goes to his God for permission to build Him a temple. Nathan here

is a professional court prophet, who undoubtedly had a set procedure for discovering the oracle of God. Of interest here is that Nathan's earlier thought was contradicted by the oracle; something he saw changed his mind. The text was taken almost verbatim from 2 Sam. 7 by the Chronicler as he sought to pinpoint the dynasty of David and the Solomonic temple as the greatness of the past and the hope for the future. The Chronicler's history tells the story of the return of the house of David in Zerubbabel and the building of the second temple under the urgings of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. An important word in the text is "servant." Here David recognizes his active role as one in the service of a greater King.

#### 2. *Pericopal Context*

All the propers for Septuagesima carry the theme of "call to grace." We, by grace, receive the invitation to become laborers in God's vineyard (Gospel). This call is not without cost, as exemplified in the Christian race of the Epistle. The text under discussion appears to have been chosen as an attempt to apply the Messianic idea to pre-Lent. In doing so, the other propers are ignored. Note, however, that grace is the dominant theme of the propers, and that this theme is appropriate to the text as well. We, like the laborers of the Gospel and the runners of the Epistle and servant David of the text, do not deserve God's reward. It is a gift. David's prayer is a response to God's promise of boundless grace, grace in spite of what David was.

#### 3. *Psychological Context*

When this text is included in the context of the entire chapter of 1 Chron. 17, we recognize that David is responding to a gentle reminder of God, delivered by Nathan, of who is who. David had asked to build a temple, a noble request. God reminds him, "I make the decisions; I have done so in the past and I will continue to do so." David

had perhaps become trapped by the notion that he was able to do something for God, that *he* knew what was best for God and His work. God's rebuke is not harsh. He says, "I have far *greater* plans for you!" David saw his presumptuousness in response to God's *love*. Humbled by God's answer, he exclaims in awe, "Who am I that I should presume to know what is best for God?" His stance in this text is that of a servant who sees what his master has done and will do for him and cries out in wonder, "How can you be so gracious?"

#### 4. Christological Context

An obvious parallel in the life of our Lord is that, like David of the text, Christ always was the servant in relation to the will of the Father. "Not My will but Thine be done" echoes throughout the accounts of his life. More important, the fulfillment of the oracle of God to David was greater than the prediction! God's giving grace, His "I know you David, as you are, and I love you," is epitomized in Christ, David's greater Son. For though David's dynasty ceased to reign 500 years after this promise, the kingdom of the Son of David is eternal in dimension. Christ built a far better temple than the one David proposed, a temple not made with hands, the church.

#### Outline

##### A Life Touched by Grace

#### I. *God's Promise to David: A Touch of Grace*

- A. David's entire life: Was it God's doing or his own? (Cf. his statement to Goliath: "I come to you in the name of the Lord of Hosts.")
- B. This special promise about a house and dynasty: Was it the oracle of God or merely a political maneuver on the part of a court prophet?
- C. David's view of it all: In the text he

freely acknowledges that he has been "touched by grace."

#### II. *The Fulfillment of God's Promise to David: Something Beyond Solomon and the Temple*

- A. Certainly, Solomon and his building of the temple are part of it. (1 Kings 8:20, 24)
- B. Certainly, too, the Chronicler looked beyond Solomon and the Solomonic temple; note his use of 2 Sam. 7 as the basis for the hope of a returned Israel and a restored temple. (Cf. 2 Sam. 7:19; 23:5; 1 Kings 8:25; 11:11-13; Ps. 89; Is. 55:3-5)
- C. Christ and the church: Do you, in agreement with the New Testament, see Jesus Christ and "the temple not made with hands" in its ultimate destiny as the final and most complete fulfillment of the promise to the house of David? (Cf. John 1:14; 2:13 ff.; Eph. 1:20; 2:19 ff.; 1 Cor. 6:18 ff.; 2 Cor. 6:16 ff.; 1 Peter 2:4 ff.)
- D. You yourself: Do you acknowledge that you, as a member of this new temple, are a person whose life has been touched by this same grace?

#### SEXAGESIMA

#### 2 SAMUEL 12:1-7

##### 1. *Historical Context*

David here is at the peak of his political power. He had vanquished all of his enemies. Only the Ammonites remain to be conquered. Once more Nathan, the court prophet, appears, but this time with an admonition of the Lord. His message to David: As far as God's revealed will is concerned, you deserve to die; nevertheless, God will spare you (v. 13). This text comes from the "court history" of David that extends from 2 Sam. 9 to 20 and then skips to 1 Kings 1-2, now one of the sources comprising the larger

corpus, the Deuteronomic history. One main purpose of this court history as it stands appears to be to explain how Solomon and not another succeeded David as king. From 2 Sam. 3:2-5 we see that Solomon was not even in the running for succession to the throne. Yet in the court history we see how his rivals Amnon, Absalom, and finally Adonijah are eliminated, permitting this son born of David and Bathsheba at Jerusalem (not Hebron as the others) to become king with the help of Zadok, Benaiah, Nathan, and Bathsheba. (1 Kings 1—2)

### 2. *Pericopal Context*

In this Sunday's propers we declare that "we put not our trust in anything that we do" (Collect). Doing so would adulterate any meaningful Lenten discipline. Man's burden of sinfulness calls again to the power of grace that reaches its fullness in our weakness (Epistle). Thus in spite of weakness we know the *growth* of grace. The way to renewal is pointed at by the Gospel: as far as in us lies, we are to be soil that is receptive to the Word that God may bring forth fruit in us. Our text is a clear finger-pointing accusation of our sinfulness. David operates as his own man, apart from God; he sows the wind and reaps the whirlwind. Nathan holds David accountable for what he is, but he does so for grace's sake, to lead him to accept God's acceptance of him (v. 13). We, too, are indicted — not to be annihilated but to receive that power by which God's grace is sufficient in our weakness.

### 3. *Psychological Context*

David's experience of himself (or lack of it!) has shifted drastically from that of the earlier text. In it he saw and acknowledged his necessary subservience to God's gracious will. In the present text we are struck by his total lack of comprehension of Nathan's parable. David knew the Law. Why didn't he recognize that the accusation was directed at him? His dilemma here is a truly modern

one. He had been seduced by his own power. David is a vivid example of a man who had gotten to be too much of a man, a superman, his own god. He had grown so mighty under God's grace that he no longer reflected on his life and its harmony with God. The self-sufficient, psychologically sound modern man constantly flirts dangerously with David's approach, that of being totally autonomous. Nathan had to jar him back to a clear view of himself and his responsibility as servant.

### 4. *Christological Context*

One could easily contrast David's culpability with Christ's innocence. Nathan's "You are the man" becomes Pilate's "Behold the man." Christ became the clear manifestation of Nathan's later statement in v. 13: The Lord has put away your sin, He has made you His son. It is in Christ that this sonship is established.

### *Outline*

#### Superman Shot Down

#### *Introduction*

Theme of Dostoevski's *Crime and Punishment*: Raskolnikov thought he was a superman, beyond the laws that bind mortal man. His crime: murder. His punishment: a tortured conscience that forced him to confess.

#### I. *David's Dilemma*

- A. Like Raskolnikov, he thought he was Superman: anything he wanted was his.
- B. Unlike Raskolnikov, his conscience was unperturbed: seduced by the illusion of power, tragically unaware of his responsibility of servanthood.

#### II. *Nathan's Role*

- A. "You are the man": the conscience David no longer had.
- B. "Even so, God will spare you, though the child will die": God accuses and forgives.

### III. *The Modern Dilemma*

- A. Man is really Superman today! Shrinking universe, shrinking God, man more powerful than ever. And irresponsibility is so easy!
- B. Playboy ethic: take what you want as long as you feel that nobody gets hurt: "What I want" becomes the moral norm.
- C. We, too, are seduced by our power: We don't even stop and take a look at our lives. Blithely unreflective, unaware that *we* are servants.

### IV. *Where Is Nathan Today?*

- A. Modern Nathans are pretty tame: Internal Revenue Service; traffic policemen; church officers armed with contribution statistics. We can maneuver around them with ease.
- B. God still accuses; God still forgives through Christ.

#### *Conclusion*

How could Nathan accuse you? Any guess on a pastor's part would be a shot in the dark. But *you* know! But even though you, too, are the man, look what God has for you!

### QUINQUAGESIMA

1 KINGS 2:1-4

#### 1. *Historical Context*

David is on his deathbed giving final instructions to his son Solomon. In the text these instructions involve being faithful to God's will. Note that he then goes on to warn Solomon about former enemies who now become continued risks to the future continuity and blessings for the house of David. From 1 Kings 1 we recognize that Adonijah was in line for the throne and was supported by both military (Joab) and spiritual (Abiathar) strongmen. David wants Solomon to remove all the obstacles that stand in the way of a firm establishment of the kingdom. Parenthetically, Nathan, as a

prophet of God who senses His will and proceeds to arrange that to come about, plays a role here too, actively supporting Solomon. The final verse of the chapter is worth noting, following Solomon's actions with regard to the potential enemies of the Solomonic regime: "So the kingdom was established in the hand of Solomon."

#### 2. *Pericopal Context*

The theme, set by the *Esto mihi* of the Introit, shows love: that of God to man, man to God, and man to brother. "For me" implies substitution, refuge from one's enemies, and a source of power. In the Gospel Christ announces His going to the cross. We follow, seeing His love as He opens the eyes of the blind. All the proper documents that God has done everything in love to the faithful, and the Epistle demonstrates the result of Christ's opening of our eyes in His act of atonement. Fellowship with Christ means to love as He loves, like blind people who have been given sight. The assigned text is a reiteration of the covenant promise that if Solomon and his descendants walk in the laws of Moses, the kingship, the symbol of the persistence of Israel as God's people, will continue.

#### 3. *Psychological Context*

The I-am-about-to-die quality of David's words leaps out from the text. His charge to Solomon comes from a stance of reflection on a full life, drawing from it the lessons he has learned about being a *total* man. His charge: Be God's man! Total manhood includes becoming all that one can become, shirking no challenge, living up to one's full potential. But as David learned from the experience recorded in the Sexagesima text, being a total man means being God's man, being faithful to His charge in one's life. For a Christian that means living up to what he already is: a total human being whose core is the experience of sonship, of being a partaker in God's total love.

**4. Christological Context**

One parallel between this text and the situation of the Gospel for the day is obvious. David says, "I am about to go the way of all the earth." Christ says, "I am going up to Jerusalem to die." The connection is even more closely drawn by the fact that in the Gospel Jesus accepts the title "Son of David" publicly only this one time as far as the Gospels record. Christ did what David could not do. He established God's throne forever and made possible our participation in the ongoing victory of God's kingdom. David charged Solomon to follow the Torah. Christ charges us to follow Him to Golgotha's cross: "If any one would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me."

*Outline*

God's Covenant, Old and New

**I. Reiteration of the Covenant Promise: If Solomon and His Descendants Walk in Moses' Laws, the Kingship Will Continue.**

- A. Background: David "goes the way of all the earth."
- B. The kingship is a symbol of the persistence of Israel as God's people.
- C. This is a primarily legalistic understanding of the covenant.
  - 1. Solomon is to kill David's enemies as well as keep the Torah!
  - 2. Our perverted covenant understanding: We tend to be legalistic, moralistic, personally vindictive. Instead of God's chosen people we are often His frozen people.

**II. New Covenant: In the Gospel, Christ Accepts the Royal Accolade of "Son of David."**

- A. He is what Israel could not be: the Fulfiller of the New Covenant.

**B. His kingdom endures where He rules men's hearts.**

- 1. His law is love and substitution (Introit).
- 2. His kingdom endures where *we*, out of love for Him and as His representatives, serve our fellow-man in love (Epistle), helping to give sight to the blind (Gospel).

**C. Implications of this covenant: Although we, too, must "go the way of all the earth," God's love is stronger than death.**

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INVOCAVIT—LENT I

1 KINGS 3:5-15

The Lord Grants Solomon Wisdom

*Interpretation of the Text*

This first episode in the series of "Solomon Stories" (1 Kings 3—11) tells how the Lord not only graciously acknowledged the new young king as David's successor, but also (and more importantly) how He adorned him with special gifts, especially the gift of wisdom. The story's initial statement links it to the preceding famous narrative concerning the succession to David's throne (2 Sam. 9—1 Kings 2) and at the same time serves to soften the shock that post-Deuteronomic Reformation Jews would experience at hearing that Solomon sacrificed elsewhere than at Jerusalem, in fact, at a "high place." Solomon *did* love the Lord, this verse protests (v. 2 had already explained that the temple had not yet been built). The editor-compiler of the "Solomon Stories" apparently put this particular story of the Lord's first dream-appearance at the beginning in order to set the stage for the sub-

sequent central account of Solomon's almost Messianic-Age glory, which was reflected particularly in the temple and in the structures and brilliance of the royal court (3:16 to 8:66). Toward the end of the "Solomon Stories" he put a second dream-appearance (9:1-9), again in response to a prayer of Solomon (Ch. 8) and again conveying the Lord's promise and in addition a warning. (Cf. 3:14 and 9:4 ff.)

At the beginning of his reign (perhaps as part of the very coronation celebration itself) Solomon travels from Judah (where, like his father, he is king of his own tribe) to a sanctuary in Israel (where he is, like David, king of the northern tribes by covenant-contract). The journey is, however, prompted not merely by political expediency. In keeping with customs of the time (see other "Royal Short Stories," especially those of Egypt, in J. B. Pritchard's *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 449), the new king also wishes to obtain an oracle from the Lord at the famous sanctuary. In response to his great sacrifice the Lord urges him to ask of Him whatever he wishes. In ancient Israel the Davidic king (whose kingship was founded upon the great Messianic promise, 2 Sam. 7) was urged to present such a petition to the Lord, possibly in the very coronation ritual itself. (Ps. 2:8; see also Ps. 21:4)

In response to the Lord's urging Solomon asks for a "hearing heart." This simple petition's long introduction (vv. 6-8) indicates that Solomon prays on the basis of the Lord's covenant with him and his father David. "Faithfulness," "righteousness," "uprightness," and "steadfast love" are all covenant terms, anchored in God's gracious activity of proving loyal to His covenant rather than in any self-righteous appeal to human goodness. Moreover, contrasting himself with his richly blessed, highly successful father, Solomon feels inadequate to the heavy burden of being king. Deliberately downgrading himself as

"a little child," he is, he says, incapable of mastering even the daily tasks of living ("going out and coming in") to say nothing of ruling over the innumerable multitude of the Lord's chosen people. Hence his petition is for the divine gift of wisdom, a heart that will hear from the Lord "what is right" (v. 11, that is, what is in keeping with the will of the Lord expressed in the covenant) and will thus be able to "discern between good and evil."

The Lord is well pleased with Solomon's prayer because of its selflessness. A king might be expected to ask for wealth, for a long life (Ps. 21:4), or for victory over enemies (Ps. 2:8). But Solomon did *not* ask for such gifts. He humbled himself for the sake of the office he was to administer, the office of being the Lord's representative and of establishing His justice on earth. He was to be a prototype of Christ, who in the Gospel for *Invocavit* humbled Himself to become the Suffering Servant. Hence the Lord adds these other things also (see Matt. 6:33): riches, honor, long life. The great Biblical motif of humiliation and exaltation (see Is. 53) is evident also here.

Only on awakening does Solomon realize, to his great surprise (cf. Gen. 41:7), that it was in a dream that the Lord had revealed His promise to him. His return to Jerusalem, the sacrifice of thanksgiving there, and the festival gathering of his people in a great communion meal are to be expected in a story apparently shaped by the literary pattern of a "Royal Short Story." Solomon is now acknowledged as the Lord's anointed ("messiah"), equipped with the special gifts and promises of God. The holy writer has so constructed the subsequent "Solomon Stories" that they hark back to this initial divine blessing.

#### *Considerations for Preaching*

A preacher may choose to approach a historical text like this with the conviction that



Christian preaching is basically the proclamation of what has happened in the history of salvation. Such a preacher will be concerned with letting the historical text speak directly to his congregation (perhaps even using a method of interpretative retelling to bring out the key motifs this sermon study has sought to highlight in its *Interpretation of the Text* above). In the case of our text, then, the sermon will show how the Lord grants the humble successor of great King David not only the wisdom he requested but in addition riches, honor, and a long life. Such a sermon will view this event as a stage on the path of the history of salvation, a path that will be traced *from* the promise to David (2 Sam. 7; cf. here v.6) *past* our text *to* the New Testament's proclamation of (a) Christ Jesus' humiliation and exaltation and (b) each baptized Christian's continual dying and rising with Christ. The following outline indicates possible suggestions for such a sermon:

#### *Introduction*

The meaning of Lent: our traveling with Christ on the path from humiliation to exaltation, a path traveled also by Old Testament prototypes.

#### The Lord Gives Grace to the Humble

##### I. *The Lord Highly Exalts the Humble King Solomon*

- A. "The Royal Short Story" (see *Interpretation of the Text*).
- B. But Solomon did not fulfill the possibilities of the office of the Davidic king (see Chs. 9 and 11, Solomon's delinquency).

##### II. *The Story of Jesus' Humiliation and Exaltation*

- A. The Gospel for Invocavit (Jesus' Temptation).
- B. The climax of Lent: Good Friday and Easter.

##### III. *The Story of the Christian's Humiliation and Exaltation*

- A. The beginning of Christian life and faith: Baptism.
- B. Our daily dying and rising with Christ (our daily tasks; going in and out before the Lord in our God-given callings. Christ, our Wisdom.
- C. Our final humiliation (death and grave) and exaltation (the Resurrection).

It is also possible for the Christian preacher to take a slightly different starting point, treating our historical text less as a report of what God once did *then* in the history of salvation (and then indicating how this fits into the rest of that history) and more as a direct address to the church *now, today*. Such preaching is, of course, vividly aware of the fact that all Old Testament historical situations (including the beginning of Solomon's reign) were open-ended to a future in which God would redeem His promises, a future that we New Testament Christians know has dawned upon us with the resurrection of Christ from the dead. The preacher who approaches our text in this way has indeed much in common with the preacher who takes a history-of-salvation approach, but he makes his congregation much more aware of our text's direct address. No matter whether this particular approach is termed "Promise-Fulfillment" or "Typological," it is keenly aware of the fact that the Old Testament bears witness to no other God than the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, it is so keenly aware of this that it concentrates in the sermon on significant *comparisons* of the analogous structures of Old Testament prototype and New Testament antitype, convinced that both conform to the contours of one pattern type (see 1 Cor. 10:1 ff.; Rom. 5:14). Such an approach should never degenerate into allegory, which fails to take history seriously. In making such compari-

sons the preacher dare not, however, point out only the *similarities* between the old and the new. He must also show the *differences* ("Behold, one greater than Solomon is here," Luke 11:31). Chs. 9 and 11 show clearly that Solomon is *not* the one who was to come but that God's people would have to look for another! The following outline is suggested by such an approach:

### Introduction

Lent. The Great Mediator, Christ, humbled Himself to fulfill His mission. Old Testament prototypes of mediators: Moses, Jeremiah, Solomon.

#### Behold, a Greater Than Solomon Is Here

##### I. *The Lord's Exaltation of the Humble Solomon*

- A. The Lord's great cosmic promise to the Davidic kings (2 Sam. 7).
- B. Solomon humbles himself for the mission to which he was called (establishing justice in Israel).
- C. Solomon is exalted by the Lord, endowed with special gifts, especially wisdom.
- D. But (the difference!) Solomon does not measure up to the opportunities and demands of his office (cf. the "if" in v. 14, cf. also Chs. 9 to 11).

##### II. *The Lord's Exaltation of the Humble Jesus*

- A. Christ humbled Himself (Incarnation, Temptation, the Gospel for Invocavit) and became obedient ("a hearing heart," "every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God"). Perfect devotion to His mission.
- B. God highly exalted Him (in the temptation story the angels finally serve Him. Later, Resurrection, Ascension, Session at God's right hand. Christ as God's Wisdom Incarnate).
- C. Christ today takes His place as the

new man in the baptized Christian as he lives in the tension (temptation) between unfaith (a life in the old age) and faith (a life in the new age). By having his old man condemned by God's law and his new man raised by the Gospel, the Christian is enabled to confront his daily tasks in the childlike prayer of Solomon. The ultimate exaltation of the Christian will occur at the final resurrection.

### REMINISCERE—LENT II

EZEKIEL 33:7-9

#### Context

33:1-20 forms an introduction to the large collection of salvation oracles that constitutes the third part of the Book of Ezekiel and is addressed to the exiles in Babylon. In fact, this section about Ezekiel's appointment to be a watchman constitutes a sort of second call of the prophet, a fact that is less surprising when we realize that Part I of Ezekiel's book consists primarily of doom oracles that had been addressed to the people before the great catastrophe of 587/6 and the exile, whereas now that the situation has changed drastically, a new sort of prophetic activity is called for, namely, pastoral encouragement of the individual exiles to live by trust in the Lord's promise of a new future for His renewed people. The three verses of our text (vv. 7-9) differ from the preceding 6 verses (which concern themselves with the hearers' response to the Lord's watchman) and from the following 11 verses (which concern themselves with the Lord's response to His despondent and lamenting people) in that they are focused on *the prophet's activity as watchman*. The text is in fact an autobiographical narrative, telling of (1) the Lord's appointment of the prophet as watchman and (2) a description of the watchman's responsibility toward the wicked. (Vv. 8 f.)

*Key Concepts*

"Son of man." This expression, current already in Ezekiel's priestly background, emphasizes the fact that it is the majestic Lord who in surprising condescension is addressing a mortal, the prophet.

"Watchman." This word picture had been applied to a prophet in Jeremiah (6:17) and Habbakuk (2:1). Old Testament narratives (2 Sam. 17:24 ff.; 2 Kings 9:17 ff.) tell of sentinels on a city's watchtowers who scan the horizon for approaching messengers or possible sudden enemy attacks. A watchman cannot prevent an enemy attack, but he can and must sound the alarm (usually with a ram's horn) so that those whose lives are endangered may take the necessary precautions. (1) If the watchman fails to sound the alarm, the Lord will be the avenger of the citizen who dies because of the watchman's delinquency. (2) If the watchman sounds the alarm and a citizen disregards it, then the watchman is not responsible.

"The house of Israel." In the hopeless situation of the exile the prophet was no longer addressing a proud, undefeated, unified nation whose independence and security was seemingly guaranteed forever by the continued existence of the temple in which the Lord had His throne. Now Ezekiel is addressing scattered groups of exiles which included (1) the frivolous who disregarded all warnings, (2) the skeptics who doubted all prophetic authority, (3) the unrepentant radical advocates of underground violence who still plotted the assassination of Nebuchadnezzar and an early return to Palestine, and (4) those exiles who lived in dark despair, who could no longer find the path of faith. The only way out of the hopeless situation to which their wicked past had led will be, Ezekiel is to proclaim, that the Lord by means of His Word will gather a new people for a new future. Each one of the exiles is to be called on to make a personal decision, a Yes or No to God's

activity of establishing a new covenant people.

"Word from My mouth." Such a Word of the Lord is both (1) death-giving and (2) life-giving. (1) V.8 cites a death-dealing Word, a veritable sentence of death (pronounced by the Lord's representative) upon every one who did not hearken to the Lord's call toward the new community, "You shall surely die!" (2) The opposite statement (here unexpressed, but implied in the context, cf. 33:13; 18:9; 37:4 f., 14; cf. also Neh. 9:29) is "You shall live" and is addressed to each one who repents and hearkens to the Word of the Lord. Accordingly the prophet-watchman's activity will henceforth be not merely looking out from his watchtower for an oracle, a Word of God (as was the task of the prophets Jeremiah [Jer. 6:17] and Habbakuk [Hab. 2:1]), but as a pastor he is to bring the Word of the Lord to bear on the individual exiles whose disobedience will mean death but whose hearkening will mean life. This will be a life-and-death Word.

"Warn the wicked." The prophet dare no longer merely publicly proclaim the Word of the Lord and then retire from the scene to let each person make his own decision at his own risk. The prophet must, pastorally and individually, confront the individual with death and life. Before the catastrophe of 587/6 the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel had proclaimed the complete destruction of Jerusalem and of the nation, as well as the abrogation of the covenant relationship between the Lord and His ever-delinquent people. Now the only possibility for the future will be the establishment of the new covenant, whereby the Lord's covenant-will (Law) will be inscribed in each person's new heart (Jer. 31:31 ff.; cf. Ezek. 34:25 and 37:26) and His Spirit poured out upon the people to give them a new heart (Ezek. 36:16 ff.). Hence the foreboding expression "warn the wicked" is like a dark storm cloud:

it has a silver lining. In fact, a more accurate translation of v. 7b, one which brings out the full paradox of the Lord's activity through His prophet-watchman, would be: "You shall give them warning *against Me*." The Lord is both enemy and friend: (a) the enemy of His people, who draws the sword against them to destroy them because of their continual disobedience and (b) their friend who has no pleasure in the death of the wicked but whose pleasure is that he turn from his wicked way and live (v. 11) and who therefore sets up His prophet to warn them against His own attack! Hence the warning of the Lord's prophet has a perspective of life and hope hidden within it. There is still a time of forbearance (Rom. 3:25), room for repentance.

"His blood I will require at your hand." The awesome responsibility of the watchman is to warn the wicked at the risk of his own life. An unwarned wicked person who continues in his godless activity will fall victim to the Lord's judgment, but the bloodguilt will lie upon the prophet; the Lord will rise up against the prophet as the dead man's avenger. This means that henceforth the prophet's future is so bound up with the future of the people that he must share even in the punishment and sufferings of its individual members (cf. 4:5 "bear the punishment of the house of Israel"). Like the martyr-prophet Jeremiah and the Suffering Servant of the Lord (Is. 49 and 53), Ezekiel also has a call to suffering. But therein lies the element of hope. These sufferings are not mere torture and negative pain; they also bear positive fruit. There is a hint of that in the final expression, "you will have saved your life." God will exalt His Suffering Servant. Christians know how this was fulfilled, not by Ezekiel, but by Christ Jesus.

The promise of genuine life was not realized to its fullest with the exiles' return to Palestine. That return proved to be a great disappointment. Zerubbabel, though of David's line, did not prove to be "He

who was to come." Nor did the Maccabees' subsequent successful establishment of an independent Jewish state save believing Jews from eventual disillusionment with what turned out to be an offensive secularization of God's promises. The fulfillment of the Lord's promise of genuine new life in a new covenant community came only with the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and the creation of the new people of God who walk according to the Spirit and thus alone fulfill the just requirements of God's will (Rom. 8:4 f). This is the ultimate future toward which the prophet is summoning his people. Precisely where the message "You shall surely die" is proclaimed, there God also creates through the Gospel the new freedom to live the new life that is dedicated to Him.

#### *Considerations for Preaching*

Preaching from prophetic texts might at first glance seem to involve less need for "translation" into relevant modern concepts than, for instance, preaching from a narrative (cf. the preceding sermon study for *Invocavit*). In actual fact, however, the prophetic texts also dare not be abstracted from their specific historical contexts. If, then, our text's key concepts are viewed in context (see *Key Concepts* above), an outline such as the following may enable the preacher to make most relevant contemporary application of the time-bound text.

#### *Introduction*

The perils of peace! The need for watchmen (see concept "watchman"). Not only pastors but all Christians are their brothers' keepers. The future of mankind is our responsibility. We, like exiled Israel, are under God's judgment (see "house of Israel"), but we are nevertheless

#### *Watchmen for Our Fellowmen*

##### *I. Our Duty to Hear the Word from the Lord's Mouth*

- A. The Word which Ezekiel heard from the Lord (cf. "word from My mouth").
    - 1. A word that condemns human perversity ("You shall surely die").
    - 2. A word that brings genuine life ("You shall live").
  - B. The Word we hear from the Lord.
    - 1. His condemnation of our wickedness.
    - 2. His faith-creating, freeing Gospel.
- II. *Our Duty to Warn the Wicked*
- A. Ezekiel's "warning the wicked." God as Enemy and as Friend.
  - B. The paradox of God's holy mercy.
    - 1. God's warning against transgressors of His will, despisers of His love.
    - 2. God's forbearance: He puts "watchmen on the heights" (LH 609).
- III. *Our Duty to Await the Lord's Final Fulfillment of His Word*
- A. The prospect before Ezekiel (cf. concept "his blood will I require").
    - 1. If the watchman fails to sound the alarm.
    - 2. If the watchman sounds the alarm.
  - B. The prospect before us.
    - 1. If we do not fulfill our mission as the servant people.
    - 2. If we fulfill this mission as Christ's renewed people.

simply because a prayer (unlike a narrative) does not ordinarily rehearse a *deed of God*. Nor does it (like a prophetic text) announce a *word of God*. Viewed formally, a prayer is rather a *response of men* to God's deeds and words. The presence of prayers in Scripture (even collections of prayers in the Psalter) points up the most significant fact that men are to respond to God's words and deeds. In the prayer of our text the general situation to which the Levites (and Ezra, their spokesman) respond is the crisis that prevailed among the returned exiles. Instead of experiencing the long-expected dawn of the Messianic age, the various groups that returned to Palestine soon found themselves demoralized and disillusioned. They remained a subject people ("slaves," v.36), dependent on the edicts of a Gentile monarch (the Persian king) for even minimal steps toward a revival of their nation: the rebuilding of the temple (permitted to Zerubbabel), the protection of their central sanctuary in Jerusalem by means of walls (a task delegated to Nehemiah), and the promulgation of a religious "constitution" (a task entrusted by the Persian king to Ezra, one of his officials). Moreover, the returnees found they were returning to a land whose inhabitants did not welcome them but harassed and attacked them. Finally, the community itself was rent by constant internal strife. Nevertheless, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story of the restoration of the temple, walls, and covenant from the hopeful perspective of faith. For even though it was always (in Stage I of each forward step) a Persian authority who had to grant permission, and even though (in Stage II) various obstacles blocked the implementation of the royal edicts (Samaritans, suspicious neighbors, and unfaithful Jews who had married pagan wives), nevertheless, in each case (at Stage III) the story ended with the praise of the Lord, who did finally grant success. The prayer from which our text is taken

OCULI—LENT III

NEHEMIAH 9:30-34

The Path of Repentance

*Approaching This Prayer-Text*

The use of a prayer as a sermon text presents the preacher with a unique task,

reflects the obstacle which temporarily halted Ezra's proposed renewal of the covenant, namely the intermarriages of Jews and pagans (v.2 refers to those who separated themselves from foreign, pagan wives). The prayer is in fact a central part of a service of repentance and confession by those who had been guilty of what was in those days an idolatrous contamination of intermarriage with pagan women.

#### *Basic Prayer-Elements*

This prayer is so couched in phrases and expressions that were traditional in the theology of earlier ages that the preacher may be tempted to approach it by tracing out the parallels in other Old Testament Scriptures. He will be well advised, however, to avoid concentrating his study on that secondary aspect. (In the Anchor Bible, Jacob Myers lists the parallels.) Rather than tearing these four verses from their context (and perhaps attempting to reduce them to one or two "thoughts"), the preacher will do well to note *what kind of praying* is going on (lamenting, confessing guilt, petitioning) and *what path of prayer* is being traveled. Instead of following the traditional pattern of Israelite praying, which leads from (1) lament through (2) petition to (3) an oracle-response from the Lord and finally to (4) praise, the long prayer from which our text is taken follows the reverse sequence. It begins with the praise of God (as Creator, vv. 7-8, and Lord of delinquent Israel's history, vv. 9-31). Only in the verses of our text does it break out into a petition and lament (32-35), climaxing in the final statement, "We are in great distress."

#### *A. The Invocation*

The Lord is here invoked as "our God, the great and mighty and terrible God, who keepeth covenant and steadfast love." Though the outside hard shell which held the Sinaitic covenant partners (the Lord and Israel) together was expressed in legal stipulations, the

central "meat" at the heart of the covenant consisted in "steadfast love." The Lord had solemnly promised to be loyal to His people; and Israel, in response, was bound to the Lord in love.

#### *B. The Lament*

The types of laments which were most customary (We-laments, They-laments, Thou-laments) have here been all but replaced by (1) a description of the vicious circle in which Israel had trapped itself by its own delinquency and by (2) an abject confession of guilt.

To be sure, this prayer does show traces of traditional We-laments (e.g., "Behold, we are slaves this day"), of complaints against the enemy (They-laments, e.g., "They have power also over our bodies"), and of Thou-laments (e.g., "Thou didst give [our fathers] into the hand of the peoples of the lands"). But these representatives of older and more normal types of lament no longer convey that vigorous complaining and passionate wrestling which characterized earlier prayers. Instead, the Thou-lament has been absorbed into a description of what may be called the vicious circle that has kept Israel continually running around in a circle of four segments. (1) Even though the Lord remained loyal to the covenant ("keepeth covenant and steadfast love") and did "bear with" the fathers, "warning them by His Spirit through the prophets," (2) yet they would not give ear ("have not kept Thy law or heeded Thy commandments," cf. v. 29, "by the observance of which a man shall live!"), (3) "Therefore Thou didst give them into the hand of the peoples of the lands." There is, significantly, no mention, as is traditional in the Deuteronomic view of history, of Israel's crying to the Lord for help from need, but merely the statement: (4) "Nevertheless, in Thy great mercies Thou didst not make an end of them or forsake them."

Instead of the customary vigorous lament

against the Lord, we have a thoroughgoing confession of total guilt on the part of man. It indicts both the fathers of old and the present generation. "Thou hast been just in all that came upon us, for Thou hast dealt faithfully, and we have acted wickedly."

### C. *The Petition*

The petition here is singularly modest. It conveys no plea that the Lord should give such gifts as national independence, freedom, victory, or the inauguration of the Messianic age. Rather, it is more like a lament, "Let not all the hardship seem little to Thee that has come upon us." Despite its dark tone, there is a great amount of genuine trust in this simple petition. Such trust was able to withstand the disillusionment and live for the dawn of a new and better day. Though the text itself does not contain praise, its nearer and its wider context in the history of salvation show that the covenant was renewed, and the laments of this prayer ended in the praise of the Lord, who had reestablished His people in His grace and would one day fulfill all His ancient promises.

### *Suggested Sermon*

A sermon on this text might well follow the path of prayer suggested by the text itself.

### *Introduction*

Lent raises the question as to what is to be our response to the Passion. Our text can lead us in a God-pleasing response.

### *Outline*

The Path of Our Response to the Lord's  
Words and Deeds

## I. *The Path of Lament and Confession*

- A. The pilgrim people of God caught in a vicious circle because of their own delinquency. Their confession of guilt.
- B. Our situation as Christians, seen in relation to both the demonic enemies to whom we are enslaved and the Lord who judges us. We confess our guilt and look to the Lord for escape from the vicious circle.

## II. *The Path of Petition*

- A. Ezra's modest petition lets God be God. No specific prescriptions, but trustful waiting on the Lord. Reason why the Lord should hearken to the petition: loyalty to His covenant.
- B. Our petitions should first seek God rather than His specific gifts. Trust in God to be God, the God of steadfast love.

## III. *The Path of Praise*

- A. God's response of words and deeds to the new postexilic community. Their response of praise. Covenant renewed. But no ultimate answer until the coming of Jesus and His resurrection.
- B. God's response of word and deed to us. Through Word and sacrament His response comes to us. He guides the history of His church and of the world. For this we praise Him in word and deed.

River Forest, Ill

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