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Homiletics

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HOMILETICS

"The Law and the Prophets"

INTRODUCTION

This article suggests a different perspective on preaching the Law. It may also indicate that a different perspective is necessary in our view of the prospective prophets who are entering the fields of the ministry. This article and the illustrative sermon are the work of a seminarian from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, who as a student intern during the past year has served the people of the Church of Our Redeemer in Seaford, Long Island. Another class has graduated from the seminaries of our Synod, and its members are taking up their preaching tasks, among the many others, in parishes across the land. Supervising pastors and seminarian assistants may find this pair of homiletic articles something on which to base their initial discussions of their new year's sharing of the pulpit tasks.

The article is directly addressing a difficulty most men feel in preaching to baptized Christians. A sermon in which Part One undertakes to make the congregation feel guilty and Part Two tells them not to worry about it because they are forgiven is something like the little wheel in which a captive gerbil takes its exercise. The preacher throws himself into the pulpit exercise, but everyone knows, himself included, that he is not really going anywhere. Even more serious is the fact that such a sermon cannot be the power it ought to be in moving men to new and better life. Far too frequently the Gospel comforts and relaxes instead of motivating and empowering. If every life goal is approached through the problem that is apparent in our failure to achieve it, and if that problem is always shown to be caused by something of which we are *guilty*, then the Gospel's allotted time in the sermon is expended in forgiveness; there is no time remaining to pick up the actual purpose of the sermon, to proclaim the act of God in Christ as the power to new dimensions in living life. The answer is not the one selected by too many preachers, that of asserting that there is really nothing wrong and that all men need do is to press forward with new vigor. If that were so, then has Christ died in vain. But because Christ has not died in vain, and therefore we are sons of God, we ought to be able to look at our renewed condition realistically and be able to recognize what is old in our continuation of the life of *adam*. From that realism about the old, something new can be brought forth.

GEORGE W. HOYER

A Perspective for the Preaching of the Law

No doubt there are many aspects to the preaching task. And yet we would not wish to deny that the task is really always the same and can be stated quite simply: It is to bring to our Christian hearers again and yet anew the message that God in Christ has reversed the verdict of death that lies on all creation. There is a great danger that in our concentration on *aspects* of the preaching task we may lose sight of the *task* itself. We may make the mistake to which so many

homiletics courses fall prey — that of assuming that we know the message we are to proclaim and now need only master the method of presenting it.

This essay attempts to take the task itself seriously but will deal only with one half of the task — what we commonly call the preaching of the Law. If we are to make the message of God's action in Christ speak to the needs of people and (what is perhaps an even more pressing concern in our day) help

people understand their world in terms of the theological categories that they hear preached from the pulpit, we must be careful to do two things:

1. We must see to it that Jesus is not just spoken of but is spoken of in relation to the problem of the human situation. In more traditional terminology we may say that the Gospel is only good news (and thus only really *is*) when it is related to the Law.

2. We must also, however, see to it that the problem developed is one that God's action in Christ actually solves. For although it may be true that in an indirect manner Jesus' saving action "solves" many difficulties of life, it is still true that these are only "solved" if they can be related to the basic problem (man's alienation from God), which has been dealt with directly by Jesus.

This paper and the sample sermon attached attempt to discuss and illustrate one method of preaching the Law, a method that can use and interpret many aspects from individual and societal life. The basic purpose is always finally to show one key fact about human existence: Man is estranged from God and thus alienated from his own essential being, and this estrangement brings upon man God's judgment and wrath. (See Rom. 3:19 f.; 1:18.)

And yet, if the function of the Law is thought of in terms of accusation of men, it may be better to speak not of preaching the Law but rather of developing or exhibiting the situation of man under the wrath of God. For the preaching described and illustrated here is not really accusation against individual hearers, nor is it an attempt to make them feel or even intellectually acknowledge personal guilt. It is not preaching that attempts to accuse *men* of *guilt*, but preaching that attempts to exhibit the *fallen condition* of *mankind*. We could nonetheless speak of an "accusation" of mankind if we do it with this caveat: Even if it is true (as Article 4 of the Apology insists) that the Law always

accuses, it does not at all follow that everything that sometimes accuses mankind is properly termed "Law." There may well be, therefore, a justifiable hesitancy in terming what follows a method of preaching the *Law*. But it is a method of developing the problem of mankind that Jesus truly solves.

The method may briefly be characterized as follows: One develops a picture of man as he was meant to be, of human life in an uncorrupted situation. In the sample sermon this is the first step and is done in a relatively straightforward fashion on the basis of the text. Naturally, however, the course of each sermon need not proceed in quite so wooden and simple a manner. The style will have to be dictated to a large degree by the sophistication of the hearers. At any rate, what is important is that it be shown that this ideal, this picture of man as God meant him to be, conflicts with the realities of our experience. And the claim is then made that this conflict is a sign that creation itself has been thrown "out of whack." Something has gone wrong with the plan.

It may help at this point to illustrate. In the sample sermon the ideal picture of man as God meant him to be is presented simply:

- Man was meant to be the wise man who*
- (1) *searches diligently for wisdom;*
 - (2) *recognizes that his search is a sharing in God's creation mandate; and*
 - (3) *is secure in the confidence that he is cared for by God.*

This picture is seen to conflict with the realities of experience, however, for

- (1) *those who search long and seriously are often unable to reach agreement on important issues;*
- (2) *the attempt to carry out God's creation mandate often aggravates rather than alleviates problems; and*
- (3) *it often seems that the wise man is not cared for by God.*

What has been demonstrated up to this point? Simply that something is radically wrong with creation. And in a very real sense, this is all that can be *demonstrated*. From here on one cannot demonstrate; he can only invite the hearer to accept his share of the burden of a fallen creation. In other words, the conflict between the ideal and the reality is now viewed as a *result* of man's disobedience and rebellion against God. At this point the preacher is no longer speaking of what is empirically evident (if, indeed, he was doing so even before). He is now providing a theological interpretation of the empirical data on the basis of the Scriptures. Thus, what are normally thought of as problems between men, problems of life, are treated theologically and traced to the basic problem of mankind's alienation from and rebellion against God. The conflict in creation is now further seen (with Biblical warrant—see Gen. 3:17; Rom. 1) as the vehicle through which God's judgment on man is expressed. All the relationships and gifts that were meant to give life are seen in fact to produce death.

It is important to note, however, that this theological interpretation of the empirical data still only has made a judgment on mankind taken collectively. And that judgment has not been one of guilt; mankind has not in that sense been accused. Rather, what has been shown is the fallen condition of mankind, a condition that brings God's judgment. Human life is thus fallen life, and, as such, it is lived under God's judgment.

Further, it must be noted that the distinction being developed here is not just between the situation of individual men versus that of mankind collectively. It is also a distinction between the concepts of *guilt* and *fallenness*. The condemnation is one that applies to mankind collectively, and the judgment is that mankind is fallen. It is not a condemnation of collective guilt, a phrase the sense of which is difficult to specify. *Guilt* is

a word used almost exclusively in personal contexts and, as such, is not appropriate here.

If we are to reach the individual hearer, we must move a step further. (Once again, not woodenly, and perhaps not even explicitly in a sermon. Here we are developing the framework or perspective from which the sermon is prepared.) We must next invite the hearer to admit his own humanity and thus accept his share in the *fallen condition*. Note that, in the sample sermon for example, we do not ask him to acknowledge his guilt for the fact that diabetes is increasing or that many poor people suffer hardships. We simply invite him to acknowledge his place among fallen men. We lay before him the condition of mankind—the implication being that this is also the condition of men, taken individually. The reason it must be done this way is that we have dealt not with duties but with ideals or aspirations. (And the preacher may find this to be the case very often when he attempts to deal with social issues in his preaching.) When a man fails in what is plainly a duty (for example, he negligently permits his children to starve), we may blame him and accuse him of guilt. If, however, he simply fails to meet an ideal (for example, nobility of character), we will not blame him, even though we would give him praise if he should attain that ideal. Our failure to measure up to our aspirations does not usually make us guilty; but it does tell us something about the kind of people we are. When this has been accomplished, the problem of the human situation is fully developed—and developed in a manner that is in contact with the realities of everyday life. The hearer now sees himself as part of a fallen humanity, a man who lives a life that falls under God's judgment.

We may summarize the process of development as follows: Certain situations common in our experience are taken to show that human life as we know it is not life as God

meant it to be. It is then suggested on the basis of Scriptural evidence that the burden of responsibility for this fact rests on mankind collectively, and each individual is urged to accept his share in the condition of mankind—but also, we must add, although it has not been the subject of this essay, to accept his share in the new creation brought about by the Second Adam.

Once again it must be stressed that what has been developed here is really the perspective from which a sermon may be developed. In many cases the actual sermon would not treat each step, at least not in so schematic a fashion. Some steps will often be present only implicitly. For example, in the

illustrative sermon no attempt is made to inform the hearers explicitly that the theological judgment is being placed first on mankind collectively and then on men individually. Further, we must stress that this is only one way of "preaching the Law"—a way that does seem to help the hearers understand life in terms of theological categories. But whatever the way, it is important for the preacher to be aware of the perspective from which he is preaching and the reasons for what he is saying. Only if he knows well and understands the problem developed will he be in a position to speak to his hearers the word by which they live—the message that God in Christ has reconciled the world.

Illustrative Sermon: "Where Is the Wise Man?"

Text: Proverbs 2:1-8

(Old Testament Lesson for Trinity XX in the Eisenach Series)

Our text is from the Book of Proverbs, one of the wisdom writings of the Old Testament. Job, Ecclesiastes, a few of the psalms, and Proverbs all fall into this classification. They are concerned with man's search for wisdom and understanding in this life. And in these eight short verses our text gives us a picture of the truly wise man:

- First* —He searches diligently and seriously for wisdom.
- Second* —He recognizes that wisdom comes from God and that his search is only a sharing in God's creative activity.
- Third* —The wise man is cared for and protected by God.

That is the picture we are given by our text. And as we will see, it is an essentially sound one even for us today. But we will also see that we must read this text in the light of the New Testament if we are to understand the fullness of God's message for us.

The wise man searches diligently for wisdom. The young seeker after wisdom addressed in the text is urged to take the words of the sage to heart. He is to store up the wisdom he learns in his mind. He is to seek wisdom as if it were as valuable as buried treasure—for it is. What is this wisdom of which the text speaks? It is not merely abstract speculation. For in the Bible wisdom is not abstract but, rather, practical. It is concerned with the problems and tensions encountered by every man in his daily life.

Thus, even if it is true that a man becomes a philosopher through loneliness, as Edmund Husserl (1859—1938), a modern German philosopher, has said, this is not the case with a seeker after wisdom. A man learns to seek wisdom not when he is alone but when he is with other people, when he is living a life in society. For it is there especially that problems and tensions arise. It is there that we face perplexities that demand careful thought. Thus, when our text speaks of wisdom, it refers to moral discernment

and understanding. The man who seeks wisdom is the man who asks: What should I do under these circumstances? What is the truly wise and prudent thing to do in such cases?

Thus, we seek wisdom in the Biblical sense when we worry about how we are to treat other people—in our family, among our friends, on the job, with our neighbors. We seek wisdom when we participate in the political processes of our society and try to determine what policies are wise. We seek wisdom when we wrestle with ethical questions—problems of honesty on the job, faithfulness in marriage and before marriage, particular questions such as abortion or the use of drugs. We seek wisdom when we try to determine how it is that we can be fair to all who need and seek our attention—how, for example, we are to balance the time between the needs of our job and our family.

That is what is involved in the search for wisdom. But how are we to search? Seriously and diligently, our text says. The writer of Proverbs knows that God's Word, even though it is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, does not answer every question we face in our lives.

It tells us to be faithful in marriage and hard-working in business—but it does not necessarily help us strike a balance between these two demands on our time. It tells us to show love to all men—but in most cases it does not provide us with any clear principles to guide and determine our political decisions.

And since it does not, we must search. The text gives several suggestions. The young man seeking wisdom in the text is advised to listen to the older sage, for in age there is experience. Our search for wisdom must begin with those who are older and wiser, who have faced and wrestled with our problems perhaps even centuries ago. There is a passage in Plato's *Republic* where Socrates makes the same point in a conversation with Cephalus:

"There is nothing which for my part I like better," he says, "than conversing with aged men; for I regard them as travellers who have gone a journey which I too may have to go, and of whom I ought to inquire whether the way is smooth and easy, or rugged and difficult."

But more than this is needed. Our search must be an earnest one. It is hard work to seek answers to perplexing questions. It involves not simply a casual thought and a conversation or two, but rather serious study. It involves a careful search for various possibilities and answers. The wise man does not merely *feel*—he thinks and studies. He tests and retests his conclusions. Thus, the man who seeks wisdom, who seeks a wise resolution of the perplexing situations in his life, is a man who is in for hard work. That is the first part of our picture of the wise man.

There is more, however. The wise man does not only search. He searches as one who knows that in the final analysis it is God who bestows wisdom. Man's search for wisdom is, in fact, nothing more than a carrying out of God's command given to man after creation: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

The earth is God's, but God uses man to keep important aspects of it going. He gives to man dominion over His earth and makes man the caretaker of most of His creation. And that is a serious business. It means that in everything we do—our work, our play, in our family, with our friends—we are to realize that we are engaged in doing God's work in His world. And so, when we seek wisdom, when we try to answer the troublesome questions that life brings, we will realize—if we fit the picture of the wise man—that the wisdom we seek comes ultimately from God. When we seek to control the

earth, we are seeking God's will for His creation. The wise man never forgets that his search for answers can never be simply *his* search. It is always *his* search as *God's* caretaker of creation. The wise man is not independent—and he never forgets that.

There is a third aspect to our text's picture of the wise man. God cares for him and protects him. God keeps watch over the way of His loyal servants, our text tells us. That is also part of what it means to be God's appointed caretaker over creation. For that is not simply a job about which we must worry and fret. It is a partnership in which we are the junior partners who are cared for by the benevolent Senior Partner.

God never forgets that the wise man is *His* man. He gives the wise man the abilities he needs to exercise dominion over the earth, and He rewards him for a job well done. That applies to all of us. God puts each of us in a particular station for the time being—He makes some fathers, some mothers, some housewives, some working women, some well-to-do executives, and others in and out of jobs. He makes some students, some He puts in positions of political power and influence, some He appoints as teachers for others. And to those who are wise—those who pursue their calling diligently and recognize it as not just their job but rather their calling from God—to them God gives happiness and satisfaction. He keeps watch over their way. Chapter three of Proverbs assures us that God gives the wise man long life and years in plenty. He smooths the path of the wise man.

That is the picture of our text. But we cannot stop there—not if we want to be honest, at any rate. For although the words of our text are true enough, they do not ring completely true in terms of our experience. They do not say all there is to be said, and we recognize that fact almost instinctively as we read them.

The wise man searches diligently and

earnestly for solutions to the perplexing moral questions that life brings. But where are those solutions? What happens when two wise men, each of whom searches diligently, disagree? Why is it that one man can hold a job and be at peace with his conscience, while another man must quit because he finds the same job unethical? Why is it that two men—each of whom desires peace—may search and study and think, and yet arrive at opposing views about how best to gain that peace? Are we to conclude that only one man is serious and morally sensitive? In some cases, no doubt, that is true; and in other cases some who are quick to offer solutions are rather slow to study seriously to see whether reasoned solutions agree with their emotional reactions. Yet surely there are cases where wise men—men, at least, who take the search for wisdom seriously—cannot reach agreement. What are we to make of that fact?

The wise man searches as one participating in God's own care for His creation. And yet, there is definitely something wrong. For it seems sometimes that the harder man seeks, the more fouled up the creation becomes. It is not hard to think of examples. Man develops new medicines to cure old diseases. Time and again this is accomplished. And the result? We now face the prospect of a society that cannot care for its aging. We keep people alive, and yet they cannot really live. Or: we can now prolong the lives of diabetics almost indefinitely and even safely deliver the children of diabetic mothers. The result? The incidence of diabetes is irreversibly increasing in our population. Man devises massive urban renewal schemes, only to decide ten years later that they have aggravated rather than alleviated the problem. How could this happen in God's creation? What are we to make of that fact?

God promises to care for the wise man, to smooth his path. And surely it is true that His people of all ages can testify that He has

given to them much joy and satisfaction and prosperity. But here too we must be honest. For many, that does not seem to be the case. For many who seek wisdom, life is at best a struggle. It may seem to have more trouble and sorrow than joy. For scores of people the words of the king in Shakespeare's *Henry the Fourth* ring true:

Will Fortune never come with both hands full,

But write here fair words still in foulest letters?

She either gives a stomach and no food —
Such are the poor, in health — or else
a feast

And takes away the stomach — such are
the rich,

That have abundance and enjoy it not.

And so again we must ask: What are we to make of that fact?

Wise men disagree. God's creation seems in turmoil. The life of the wise man seems sometimes to be nothing but a frantic and sorrowful rush to the grave. What are we to make of those facts? In Genesis 1:28 God gave man dominion over the earth. But not much farther on in the Bible we find God saying to Adam: "Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life." What had happened to make such a difference? Man had tried to be his own boss; he had tried to play God. And ever since then men — all of us in fact — have been going around doing the same thing. Ours is, in fact, a fallen world; it lies under the curse of God. And so — there is no truly wise man. For none of us really manages to put God's will ahead of his own. Our problem is not simply that we do not always find the wisdom we seek in a particular situation. Our problem is that we are not truly wise. We have tried to play God and instead have played the fool. We have become God's enemies rather than His partners in caring for creation.

It is hard to take that seriously. We keep thinking that just one more bright idea of ours will make everything right. But it never does — because we are not bright enough to solve the problem of a fallen world. And so finally, being ruthlessly honest with ourselves, we must ask: Is there, then, any solution? Is there nothing I can do? Is there any plan that human wisdom can dream up to set things right again? Must I always seek wisdom but never find it?

And just when it seems that it is senseless to ask any more such questions because the depressing answers are so obvious, just when we think it must be useless even to seek wisdom, just then we can hear again and anew Paul's words in First Corinthians: "God has made Christ our *wisdom*, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption." Paul has just finished asking, "Where is the wise man?" And he says that God has made the wisdom of this world foolish. But, he says, we preach Christ crucified. And although He may be a stumbling block to some, to those who are called He is both the power of God and the *wisdom* of God.

There is the answer — not man's, but God's — to a fallen world, a world in turmoil. In Christ we see God's own wisdom, the wisdom of patient suffering, being made manifest. We see God once again making man His partner and helper. We see God calling all of us once again to Himself, calling us to live as His wise children. All that we see in Christ, for as Paul says in Colossians, in Christ are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

That is God's answer. And, it is important to note, it is not an answer that solves every perplexity that life brings. We are still not told how to spend our time, how to be fair to both sides in a dispute, what political decisions are most wise. We are told, however, that God in Christ has accepted us again as sons; that He has set us free to go about His work of caring for His creation. We are still

going to fail, more than once or twice, but those failures and wrong decisions need no longer make us think that even to seek wisdom is senseless. For God has done the really hard part—He has made of us new men.

We are free then to go about our daily tasks, confident in the fact that we live as children with whom God is pleased, not as enemies with whom He is angry. The writer of Proverbs was indeed correct. Wisdom does come from the Lord. And so, in every aspect of our lives, we can seek wise and practical solutions, recognizing that our search—even though it gives only partial answers—is part of God's own work in maintaining His world until the day comes when He decides to finish with this world and give to those who are in Christ a new life in a new world. Our failures need not

overcome us, for we know God's secret: that He has already acted in Christ to make new the fallen creation. Then too, we will know that God does indeed care for and protect the wise man. For no matter how difficult the perplexity, even when it seems that there is no right answer, one thing will always stand sure: God has made Christ our wisdom. And to understand that wisdom, to learn more fully what it means that God has acted in Christ to make us new men, to begin to appreciate that one fact—that is the work of a lifetime. But it is well worth the effort. For we have Jesus' own promise that at the end of that life He will say to us: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant. Enter into the rest prepared for you."

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