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Homiletics

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Here are more sermon ideas based on the new ILCW Three-Year Cycle for 1973-74. The suggestions cover the Epiphany and Lenten seasons, but space limitations prevent our filling in all the Sundays.

THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD

Isaiah 42:1-7

Acts 10:34-38

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Sunday, Jan. 13, is a super day. One football game—the Super Bowl—will summarize the entire 1973 professional football season. The Scripture lessons which the new series appoints for this day reveal a super mission for Christians. This Sunday's lessons summarize God's mission—His super News—for individuals, congregations, conferences, districts, synods, the Christian church.

In many congregations a post-Christmas depression sets in: after Advent, a joyous celebration of our Savior's birth, His Epiphany, then what? Today's pericopes answer just that: Jesus' birth was a new beginning of God's great mission for all men, *and we have a part in that mission*. If a post-Christmas depression sets in, maybe we are not clear on God's mission *and our part in it* (as a congregation and/or as an individual).

In the Gospel, John is mighty; Jesus is mightier. There is no doubt who the Messiah is: both the people and John himself disqualify John, and Jesus is acknowledged Messiah independently of John (*not* during His Baptism but while He is praying). Jesus is God's chosen Servant (Is. 42:1), and He receives His unique servant role from the Spirit (see Acts 10:38) which He will surrender at the cross (Luke 23:46). The voice from heaven speaks approval of Him in words that echo Ps. 2:7 and Is. 42:1 (see Luke 9:35). Jesus' part in God's mission: He is the Messiah-Servant; with the Holy Spirit He is God's Good News for all.

John described Jesus' role in Luke 3:16-17. The Messiah will baptize with Holy Spirit and fire. While John may have intended a strong note of judgment, Luke still remembers Pentecost. In Acts the Holy Spirit actively carries on God's mission through men and among *all* men. The rural imagery in Luke 3:17 also seems to sound a strong note of judgment, but the primary purpose of a winnower is to gather

grain! The Messiah comes to gather to Himself the new Israel. He does that with the Holy Spirit.

John had summoned *all* Israel to repent and be baptized (Luke 3:3). Jesus is part of all Israel. He identified with the people in their need and expectation; He was involved with them, in their midst. So, He was also baptized.

In 3:23-28, Luke says Jesus' messianic mission is validated by Davidic descent. By tracing Jesus' ancestry back to Adam, Luke reminds us that Jesus was bound by kinship to all humanity, and His mission is to all mankind. By calling Adam "son of God," Luke connects Jesus' Baptism with God's purpose in creation: man was designed for *sonship*! Jesus exemplifies sonship and shares it with all who become disciples. (See especially *Jesus and the New Age*, by Fred Danker [St. Louis: Clayton Pub. House, 1972].)

Isaiah 42:1-7 includes the first (investiture) Servant song. The Servant songs defy a singularly absolute identification of the Servant; the evangelists apply them to Jesus, and Paul even applies them to himself (Acts 13:47; Gal. 1:15; Rom. 15:21). The Servant is invested with Yahweh's spirit. The Old Testament use of "spirit" is in the sense of "God exerting power," God's mysterious penetrating force. By the Spirit creation is achieved and judges execute wonders. Through the Spirit the Servant will be an instrument of God's power, establishing justice among *all* nations: God is active in Him.

The Servant is God's announcement of *His justice*, that is, He shows forth God's constant faithfulness (not man's good and bad deeds). God will be just; He will be true to Himself—a merciful and gracious God, rich in kindness and faithfulness (Ex. 34:6) as His Servant reveals.

The Servant works patiently and quietly. His mission is to *all* nations (see Luke 2:32). Like Abram He is a blessing on the nations (42:6-7), and like Moses He forges a new covenant (42:6), matching the new Exodus theme of Is. 40-55, all under God's directive—His grace.

In Acts 10:34-38, Peter proclaims to Cornelius (part of "all nations") that after the time of John, God anointed Jesus with Holy Spirit and power (*dynamis*). In Rom. 1:16, Paul says the Gospel is God's *dynamis* for salvation to all people who believe. The presence of Holy Spirit and power in Jesus resulted in His doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil.

Peter's words describe God's objective outlook toward men; He has no favorites. He proclaims His Good News through Jesus Christ—Good News for *all* people, the dynamite for salvation.

Peter was criticized for not following acceptable procedures (Acts 11:1-4). The Holy Spirit had come upon all who had listened, even Gentiles, in a powerful way, and therefore Peter concludes that "God gave them no less of a gift than He gave us!"

In all three passages God's Good News is broadcast: He is sending His Spirit among men—through His chosen Servant, through His Son, through all disciples. That Good News is for all nations, everyman. That is God's mission; our Savior was born for that mission; God's people share His mission.

In all three lessons there is a superabundance of Gospel material. Individual congregations can hear these lessons in the context of specific goals and shortcomings. The sermon could focus on congregational self-assessment or rededication, emphasizing God's justice for all nations as evidenced through His Servant who gathers grain and does good. Is the congregation carrying out God's mission? Is our purpose God's mission? The sermon could focus on individuals, emphasizing sonship, the Messiah who identifies with needs, the Spirit who works in men, and Peter's individual action. Is the individual God's missionary? A faith goal might emphasize God's unbelievable, objective grace evidenced in His Servant, faithfulness, Spirit's presence. A life goal might include God's indefatigable mission to people which climaxed in His Son—the invested Servant—who commissions His followers with the same Spirit and mission.

The theme of this Sunday's pericopes is beautifully expressed in six ways in the Mission Affirmations adopted by LCMS in 1965, especially in Affirmation One.

These Mission Affirmations definitely offer abundant help for preaching this day, as well as ample Bible class materials and guidelines for a congregational self-assessment.

Co-missioned

Introduction: Superbowl, Super Sunday; God has Super News, and we participate in it.

- I. God has Super News—His mission to all nations. The Good News of:
 - A. God's Spirit present (Luke 3:15-17, 21-22; Is. 42:1).
 - B. God's justice (Is. 42:1-4); His faithfulness (Luke 3:15, 22).
 - C. God's objectivity (Acts 10:34): *all* nations.
 - D. God's new creation (Is. 40-55). God bore a Son to bear sons; He is on the move and will not be stopped.
- II. His only Son is that mission: God's chosen Servant (Luke 3:21-22; Is. 42:1-4), commissioned and approved by the Spirit (Luke 3:21-22), identifies with needs (Luke 3:21), gathers grain (Luke 3:15-17); He *acts*—does good (Acts 10:34-38).
- III. His Spirit in us is that mission:
 - A. Jesus baptizes with Holy Spirit and fire (Luke 3:15-17).
 - B. Holy Spirit is actively present through men and among men (Acts; Luke 24:47-49).
 - C. Proclaimed by Peter with innovation (Gentiles).
 - D. Response to Peter's sermon (Acts 11:15-18).

Conclusion: God's mission is revealed; an abundance of Spirit fuel; the grain is ripe.

John Pohanka

EPIPHANY, THIRD AFTER

Isaiah 61:1-6

1 Corinthians 12:12-21, 26-27

Luke 4:14-21

The standard lessons stressed "Christ Manifest in His Mercy," but the new Cycle C pericopes say it more powerfully, for each reading refers explicitly to the effective working of God's Spirit. He anoints the Servant for His ministry of mercy to the down-and-out, propels Jesus into His hometown synagog with the stupendous claim of being that Servant "today" and baptizes us into Christ's body now. Isaiah's

announcement is sheer grace, and the Spirit keeps it coming—first in Jesus, then in His body the church (each time through a baptism!).

Epiphany is more than a “summons to stare” at the Lord’s glory. Taken together, these readings invite us to let the Spirit make Jesus manifest in us today. We poor, blind, oppressed captives—freed by Christ—are now commissioned to do His work as part of His body! The Sunday theme might be “Christ Manifest in His Spirited People” or “Jesus at Work in You Now.”

The Gospel ends abruptly at verse 21, a cue for the preacher to dwell more on Christ’s work than on the rejection by Nazareth. A sermon on the Gospel might follow this outline:

I. JESUS WAS AN ORDINARY MAN (Luke 4:16, 22)—so are we!

God’s grace does not dazzle—it “gets close” in the ordinary. But do we “know Jesus so well” that we miss the message (verse 21)? God’s high intentions for us are good news to “plain folks” (see also Acts 10:28; 2 Cor. 4:7; and verse 27 of the Epistle).

II. ANOINTED BY THE SPIRIT (Luke 4:18)—so are we!

Jesus’ Baptism (chap. 3) commissioned Him for Servant work (see Acts 10:38). The Spirit has graciously anointed you to be part of Him (see 1 John 2:27). Can we help our people make the most of their baptism?

III. FOR EXTRAORDINARY WORK (Luke 4:18-19, 21)—as are we!

This was the “keynote speech” of His redemptive work for us! We have been freed to take part in that work—explore the marvelous details here—*euangelizo, kerysso, aphasis*. Have we located the poor, blind, oppressed captives around us? Can we challenge people with specifics? What do we expect the Spirit to do through us? (See John 14:12.)

Don’t pass up opportunities to visualize the message. Use a scroll to help the text come alive. A balloon blown up or a hand inserted into a glove might demonstrate the Spirit “shaping” us into Christ’s body. Names or pictures placed on a large silhouette of Jesus might accompany the offertory. Explore Hymns 66 or 482 for the way they express the textual truth.

Pray for Christ’s Epiphany in you!

Michael Kasting

EPIPHANY, FOURTH AFTER

Jeremiah 1:4-10

1 Corinthians 12:31–13:13

Luke 4:21-30

Traditionally the theme of the Epiphany season is the manifestation of God and His power, especially as it is made known to the world in His Son, Jesus Christ. The three lessons for the Fourth Sunday After Epiphany assigned for Cycle C of the new lectionary suggest a theme focusing on the manifestation of the Word of God and its power to fill individuals, the church, and the world with a life-changing force.

Our world today is bombarded with words, words, and more words. So often we reach the point where we want to turn off the endless torrent of those words no matter what their source—the church, the preacher, the radio, television, teachers, newspapers, or magazines.

And yet the church continues to focus its proclamation and its communication on words, indeed on *the Word*. Many would say, “No wonder the church is in such deep trouble today.” “No wonder the attendance is sparse, the classes empty, and programs and activities are failing.” People are tired of words. They want and need action.

But does the church need to apologize for her words? After all, isn’t that the way that God has revealed Himself to us, through His Word of power (the Word of creation; Jesus Christ, the Word incarnate; the Word of love which the Holy Spirit continues to communicate through people today)?

From all corners we hear people advocating, “We’ve got to get back to the Word!” That’s true and it sounds very nice and safe to *say*. But these three Epiphany lessons tell us that it makes a difference how we *do* that. Just speaking the Word or hearing the Word isn’t enough. There has to be communication. Something has to happen which changes people. Not change them from one petrified and immovable position to another but rather change them on the inside—change their hearts so that what people communicate on the outside by their words and actions will communicate God’s love.

God’s Word has the power to precipitate those changes in the individual, in our

church, and in our world. It happened with Jeremiah, it happened in Christ, and it happens wherever God's love rules and controls the hearts of His people.

Words! Words! Words!

- I. The Word of the Lord filled Jeremiah.
 - A. God called Jeremiah through His Word (Jer. 1:4-5)—calling words.
 - B. God's Word broke down Jeremiah's excuses (v. 7-8)—vain words.
 - C. God spoke through Jeremiah with power (v. 9-10)—powerful words.
- II. Jesus fulfilled (filled full) the words of Scripture.
 - A. God promised a Savior through His Word (Luke 4:18-19)—calling words.
 - B. Many make excuses for not believing the promises of God's Word (v. 24-29)—vain words.
 - C. Jesus is the Word which was promised. He gives it body (v. 21)—powerful words.
- III. We must be filled with the Word of God.
 - A. God's Word calls us to exercise love in all things (1 Cor. 12:31)—calling words.
 - B. Without love our words are noisy gongs and clanging cymbals (1 Cor. 13:1-3)—vain words.
 - C. God's Word communicated in love changes lives (v. 4-13)—powerful words.

Donald R. Haase

EPIPHANY, FIFTH AFTER

Isaiah 6:1-8

1 Corinthians 14:12b-20

Luke 5:1-11

The theme for the Fifth Sunday After Epiphany is worship of God. Worship is the focal point where God's revelation to man becomes an epiphany which draws a confessional response from the man of faith to a life-style of discipleship. Epiphany is revelation incarnate; that is, God reveals Himself through the ordinary elements of life (for example, the revelation of God's presence "epiphanyed" in water, wine, wafer, and ultimately in Jesus, God-man). The surprising miracle of epiphany occurs when a man, as if looking through a window, "sees" with the eyes of his God-given faith through the common things of life and discovers God's

ever-present revelation. Man's response to the "epiphanying" of God's revelation is a worshipful confession of sin and faith which realizes itself in a life-style of discipleship. All of life then becomes a worshipful response to God's revelation "epiphanyed" in the common elements of life. God's revelation in the Isaiah text was a vision-epiphany bringing Isaiah to a confession of sin and faith followed by discipleship. Paul, writing to the Corinthians, is concerned that God's gifts (such as speaking in tongues) do not cause confusion and overshadow God's revelation in the epiphany of Word and Sacrament which calls men to discipleship.

In the Gospel, the person of Jesus and His active authority become an epiphany where the revelation of God's surprising goodness flows through that which is common in life to the eyes of faith. The response is a confession of sin and faith realized in discipleship. When the sick are healed by Jesus' authoritative word (4:40), and when the poor, oppressed, and outcast hear the authoritative way in which Jesus speaks God's Word of hope (4:43-5:1), they respond with worship to the epiphany. Yet while all these revelations of God's goodness become epiphanies for others, Simon apparently does not "see" them clearly as such. But at the Master's authoritative Word, his eyes begin to open. He goes fishing with the odds for a good catch against him. Suddenly, the simple, common, everyday life-style of fishing becomes for Simon the window for "seeing" into the eternal. The surprisingly large catch of fish "epiphanyed" for Peter God's overwhelming goodness in the person of Jesus, the Lord of life. The name changes from Master to Lord and from Simon to Peter signify a new confessional relationship between Peter and his newly found Lord. "Seeing" (5:8), Peter falls on his knees worshiping his Lord and confessing his unworthiness. Again he is surprised by God's goodness. Instead of rejection, Peter will be an epiphany of God's goodness to others through a life-style of discipleship.

John D. Coran

TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR LORD

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

Luke 9:28-36

The lessons appointed for the Transfiguration of our Lord on the Last Sunday After Epiphany have to do with people who encounter God's glory and who then reflect—or try to reflect—it to others. In order of appearance, these persons are Moses, St. Paul, and Jesus' own disciples.

The Old Testament lesson directs our attention to the final days and death of Moses. After an appropriate period of mourning, Israel is asked to remember this giant of God's people whom Yahweh knew "face to face," and whose exposure to the divine presence (glory) was reflected in mighty signs throughout Exodus and Covenant. The nation's remembrance is to take the form of "listening to"—"obeying"—Moses' immediate successor, Joshua.

The *context* of the Epistle establishes that the glory of God's New Covenant in the face of Jesus Christ supersedes the glory revealed via Moses. It also insists that Paul and company are the faithful transmitters of this "superior glory." In contrast, the lesson *per se* discloses strong opposition to these claims. Some in Corinth were saying to Paul, "Superior glory indeed! Just look at the pitifully weak (veiled) way that you transmit it. Your lack of eloquence and your harping on 'Christ crucified' prove that your product is inferior!" To this St. Paul replies, "God's glory is hidden, cloaked in apparent weakness and defeat. It's for the service of such a glory that my suffering companions and I most certainly qualify."

The Gospel reinforces St. Paul's perspective on New Covenant glory. St. Luke pictures Moses and Elijah, the "kingpins" of Old Covenant glory, talking to Jesus about the "departure" (exodus) which He is to accomplish at Jerusalem—a radical departure which will involve Him in suffering, rejection, and death. That such drab, defeatist features should accompany the Messiah's assumption to His kingdom's throne was incomprehensible to the disciples. By wanting to set up his booths on the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter showed that he was still "hung up" on old visions of glory connected with the Moses-related Exodus and Covenant, the assumption of Elijah into heaven, and the anticipated dawn of God's apocalyptic messenger (a Moses-Elijah figure). As for the rest of the disciples, their preoccupation with works of majesty (9:37-45),

their haggling about who was the greatest (vv. 46-48), and their yearnings to have an exclusive corner on the healing market (vv. 49-50) showed that they had not gotten the message of hidden glory either. They would not "hear" this message—"obey" it by living it—until after Jesus' resurrection.

In terms of a homiletician's model—Problem, Point, Power—the Gospel's message could be outlined as follows:

Problem: Our human idea of glory crashes head on with God's—as He reveals it in Jesus Christ. To our human nature, glory suggests privilege, power, success, and fame. To God it suggests humble, obedient, suffering servanthood. There are three basic ways of handling this clash: We can ignore God's view and stick with our own (the way of the disciples); we can reformulate God's view to look like our own (the way of Peter via the booths); or

Point: *we can reformulate our own to conform with God's* (the way of Jesus and St. Paul).

Power:

1. The praying Christ, who encouraged His transfiguration via prayer, and who teaches us to pray.
2. The transfigured-transfiguring Christ, who changed the slow-to-follow disciples into bold carbons of Himself.
3. The indwelling Christ, who by His Spirit gently yet inexorably transforms us from one degree of His glory to another.

Werner K. Boos

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

Deuteronomy 26:5-10

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

The lessons for this First Sunday in Lent fit into the rest of the propers for Invocavit quite smoothly, but with a change in general theme from that of the historic pericopes. The Introit, Gradual, and Tract, all from Psalm 91, speak of God's protection and His promise to answer the prayer of, and to rescue, the one who knows His name. While the traditional lessons speak mostly of temptation, the Tempter, and suffering, the new ones

key more on the deliverance and protection God gives to those who trust in Him. This all fits nicely into a Lenten theme which looks forward to the Easter victory rather than one which concentrates at length on Jesus' sufferings.

God's deliverance for those who have a trusting relationship with Him is clearly stated in the first lesson, a fascinating recital of Yahweh's saving acts in the history of Israel. This is set in the liturgy of an offering of thanks to Yahweh and is one of the earliest creedal statements in the Bible. The second lesson calls this deliverance being saved, justified, not being put to shame, a deliverance which comes to those who confess Jesus as Lord with their lips and believe in their hearts that God raised Him from death—another hint at God's delivering power. Jesus' deliverance from the temptation of the devil through His faithfulness to His Father's word and will is presented in the Gospel. This prefigures His supreme victory over the forces of evil, which guarantees the deliverance of all who trust in this God who has declared and demonstrated His power to save.

In looking at the Lucan account of the Temptation, we note several unique points, especially in comparing it with Matthew's. The second and third temptations are in reversed positions in Matthew and Luke, and the conclusion of the reading in Luke hints at further tempting (see Luke 22:3, 31, 53). The concluding temptation here does not have the question of Jesus' worshipping the devil, but rather the suggestion that God Himself is tempted. The first and last temptations in Luke are based on Jesus' sonship with the Father, a fact stated by the Father at the Baptism (3:22). This seems an important key to the meaning of the Temptation for Luke.

The obedience of Jesus to His Father's will as made known in Scripture (which provides an answer for each temptation) is what is at stake. For Jesus to carry out the deliverance for which He was sent, He must accept His Father's purpose and not seek success by worldly standards which are placed before Him by all three temptations. The theme of obedience to His Father's will in spite of appearances—which brings to mind Phil. 2:5-11—is a good one around which to construct a sermon. One can joyfully proclaim the

humble obedience of Jesus as our strength and our deliverance from everything that keeps us from sonship with the Father. One may further find occasion here to point out how many problems for God's people and His church arise from our not hearing His will clearly or from our accepting the wrong standards of success too readily. God's voice alone offers true sonship.

There are many rich themes within this pericope, including the symbolism of desert and fasting. Jesus' hunger (v. 2) is especially meaningful in Luke. God fills the hungry (1:53) and by His grace supplies all that is essential to true life (15:21-24). God gives bread to those who follow Him into the wilderness (9:10-17). In our text Jesus is not pointing away from the physical nourishment so much as pointing from that which is only of earth to that which comes from God. He fills our hunger if we are ready to hunger for Him. It is possible to approach the topic of Jesus' obedience from the aspect of His hunger. Our hunger should not be satisfied too easily. Since God offers us Himself, how can anything less suffice?

David Buuck

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

Jeremiah 26:8-15

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Luke 13:31-35

"Turn from your sins and live." This paraphrase expresses the theme for the day. In the Lutheran Church we know and teach that all men are from their beginning sinful and unclean, but we frequently stop trying to be otherwise. The Law, accusing us here, "Turn from your sins or die . . ." (see Luke 13:5), is countered by the Gospel which inspires us to amend our sinful ways. We must not be comfortable with the Law's accusations: simply remaining accused of our sins and not turned from them. We fear God's threat and desire to please Him by our actions.

We must not cling to the Law nor any externals for our salvation but only to the Gospel. Today we preach repentance and believe that where there is repenting there is turning from sins and changing evil ways through the power that God's Holy Spirit gives.

In today's Gospel, it is Jerusalem that Jesus is addressing—the holy city and its churchmen, the Pharisees. Jesus, threat-

ened by death but not afraid of what men can do to Him, intends to continue His work in Jerusalem. Yes, He claims these Israelites as His own and does not abandon them and their city even when threatened with death by the very people He loves. He continues preaching, giving them the opportunity for repentance and new life, just as He does for us.

Ted Jannuska

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

Exodus 3:1-8b, 10-15

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Luke 13:1-9

Possible Theme of the Sunday: God's continuing self-extension to His people; the everlastingly warm, quiet touch of His steadfast love; the stubborn tendency of rebellious humanity to reject the love of God and follow a self-planned path—a path that leads to a fruitless life and ultimate destruction caused by worship of self instead of loving obedience to God; God's ceaseless mercy and justice as demonstrated in Jesus Christ.

Old Testament lesson: God's searching, self-extending love reaches into the land of Midian to touch an unlikely leader: a hot-tempered murderer and outlaw named Moses. God comes to Moses in a burning bush which miraculously is not destroyed despite the heat of the flames. Here the quiet, powerful, warm love of God, which creates things instead of destroying them, is marvelously demonstrated.

God has had pity on His suffering people and wants Moses to be His man, to implement His will that His people should be free. God has a grand plan, and He almost pleads with Moses to heed His call. Moses, like all of us, has a truckload of reasons why he is not really the person God has in mind. But God knows His mind—and Moses' and ours—far better than we do. His love will not let Moses off the hook, and the genesis of the Exodus happens despite Moses' protests of his incompetence.

Epistle: This text is a catalog of God's acts of grace, Israel's riots and rebellions, and God's responses of unswerving justice and discipline. St. Paul writes that the "new Israel" had better learn from these disastrous experiences of our spiritual forefathers if we are to avoid bringing

God's judgment upon ourselves.

Ultimately, we who are living in the end time are to realize three things: 1. We dare not be complacent as we live out our call to be God's people; 2. We are not alone as we confront the daily anxieties and temptations of living in this world, for every human being experiences those same kinds of realities and feelings; 3. The steadfast love of God in Christ Jesus will support us in every situation, every temptation that coaxes us or slaps us. We need only to put our confidence and hope in Christ instead of in ourselves or in other false gods.

Gospel: The two tragic incidents referred to by Jesus in vv. 1-5 are not recorded elsewhere in Scripture. But our Lord's point is the same as that made by St. Paul in the Epistle: Repent and believe while you still have time.

A study of Mark 11:13-14, 20-21 and Matt. 21:18-21 might prove helpful in discerning the point of Jesus' parable in vv. 6-9.

Reading up a bit on fig trees in one or more of several dictionaries could possibly refresh the memory and bring the reader somewhat closer to the meaning of the story told by our Lord.

Vegetation, Not Speculation

Concept A: Human misfortunes and disasters are always in the news. (Examples from present day.) Apparently, human tragedy is nothing novel, for our text tells us of two such events in the time of Jesus' ministry on earth (vv. 1-5).

Concept B: Human beings love sensation and excitement. There is a certain odd joy and titillation we experience—but scarcely admit—when other people suffer a disaster. Every newspaper editor knows about this human trait and capitalizes on it to sell his product. And we love to engage in speculation (on the job, at school, around the dinner table) as to why such things happen. (Examples of several different speculative alternatives: gross sin of people involved, wrath of God, apathy toward God, absence of God, human error, and so on.)

Concept C: Jesus puts it bluntly to His listeners and to us, and then He tells the fig-tree story to enrich His point: "Don't waste your time in speculation about what you perceive to be tragedies in other people's lives. Instead, use your time wisely to repent of your own sins against God and

to produce the verdant *vegetation* of a faith that is freed by repentance to serve the Lord." (Possible reference here to the "fruit of the Spirit" in Gal. 5:22-23 or to other concrete situations on the local scene.) The parable reflects the steadfast, patient love of God as well as His unwavering righteousness. (It might also be worth noting that the fig tree requires "care and feeding," for it cannot produce vegetation without nourishment. So also the Holy Spirit cares for us and feeds us in Word and Sacrament and in other, mysterious ways of His own choosing even as He "blows where He wills").

Concept D: Thank God that He forgives us, frees us, and feeds us to enable us to produce "vegetation" pleasing to Him. He buried His Son to feed us at our roots, and He raised Him from death to give us life that never withers. About that there need be no speculation, for that action is God's—and His promise is sure.

Richard M. Koehneke

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Isaiah 12:1-6

1 Corinthians 1:18-31 (long)

1 Corinthians 1:18, 22-25 (short)

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

The unifying theme of the three lessons for Laetare is "Joy in the Unexpected." The beautiful message of Is. 12 is about the coming "day" of the Lord (v. 1), a messianic time when God's plans for His people will be completely clear. God will be thanked for turning His anger away from His errant people and offering them comfort instead. God is the salvation, the strength, and the song of the believer. The God whose anger turns to comfort and whose salvation is a joy is an "unexpected" God to people who have experienced His anger or who have not yet appreciated the joy of His presence.

Paul describes for the Corinthians a God who is also used to doing the unexpected. His strength is disguised under weakness; His wisdom appears to be foolishness. But there is "joy in the unexpected": the word of the cross is the power of God to those who are being saved. The Jews seek signs and the Greeks look for wisdom (and who knows all the things we look for or expect God to be), but God has chosen the unexpected way of revealing Himself.

Part of the power of the parable of the

prodigal son lies in its unexpected resolution. The son returns in disgrace, having no further claim to his father's home or goods, expecting only to be hired as a servant. But what joy there is, for father and son alike, in the unexpected return and the unexpected welcome!

There's a story about a little boy who was drawing a picture in Sunday school. His teacher, looking over his shoulder, asked, "Who is that?"

"That's a picture of God," said the little boy.

"But nobody knows what God looks like," protested the teacher.

Beaming proudly, the little boy replied: "They will when I get done!"

The parable of the prodigal son is one of those "aha" experiences. When it comes to describing God, the weighty theological terms pale beside this very touching, human vignette that portrays a forgiving father. Now we know the unexpected joy of forgiveness and reconciliation.

A suggested sermon outline based on the parable:

The Unexpected Father

- I. Does anyone know what God looks like?
 - A. Difficulty of describing God adequately or believably.
 - B. Childish ideas about God (our ideas often never grow up).
 - C. Running away from a Father we haven't bothered to know.
- II. Coming to oneself.
 - A. The inheritance disappears; the dream vanishes.
 - B. Honesty with oneself.
 - C. Hope refocuses on the waiting Father (v. 17).
- III. The unexpected Father.
 - A. The joyous welcome is unexpected.
 - B. The return brings great joy to Father and son alike.
 - C. That's who God is: the forgiving, reconciling Father—even when we expected otherwise.

Ronald M. Rentner

THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Isaiah 43:16-21

Philippians 3:8-14

Luke 20:9-19

The three lessons for this Sunday suggest the theme of *judgment* for those who

perceive the plan of God's salvation in Jesus, nevertheless reject Him as Christ and Lord, but also the theme of *the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus* by grace through faith as Christ and Lord. God, since our fall into sin, has actively pursued His plan of salvation for us. This can clearly be seen in His dealings with the chosen people of Israel (Is. 43:16-21). This plan of salvation reached its height and conclusion in the person of Jesus Christ. In Him He made all things new. His sufferings, death, and resurrection secured once and for all our salvation. But not all are willing to be saved (Luke 20:9-19). Some reject Jesus as Christ and Lord. They neither honor Him nor give Him their praise. But to those who know Jesus as their Savior and Lord, the blessings of His death and resurrection are theirs (Phil. 3:8-14). They are made righteous and have eternal life with God.

Gospel for the day: The chief priests and other religious leaders had come to Jesus and questioned Him as to His authority. Although Jesus explained to them not only about His authority but also about the nature of His mission in the parable on the wicked tenants, the leaders did not accept Him. Many still question today.

Unlike Matthew and Mark, Luke has Jesus speaking the parable directly *proston laon*. However, in verse 19 it is very clear the religious leaders were among those who heard the parable.

Georgoi are tillers of the soil, farmers, vine-dressers, tenant farmers.

It is clear from the parable that the planter of the vineyard is God, the vineyard is Israel (Is. 5:1 ff.), the tenants are the leaders of Israel, and the servants are the prophets of God.

The three gospels differ somewhat in the number of servants sent to the tenants and what happens to them. Luke's three servants are badly treated but none are killed, undoubtedly to point out much more strongly the wickedness of the last act of the tenants.

To right the situation, the owner sends his beloved (*agapeton*) son. Jesus is referring to Himself. (3:22)

The tenants murder the son in a selfish wish for the inheritance. What they do not understand is that in the act of killing the son they will lose all, not only the vineyard but their lives as well.

The son is thrown out of the vineyard and killed. Some see this as a prophecy of Jesus' crucifixion outside of Jerusalem and refer to Heb. 13:12, 13. In Mark, the son is killed in the vineyard and then thrown out.

In Matthew the leaders answer Jesus' question about what the owner will do then. They judge themselves. In Mark and Luke Jesus answers it Himself. Matthew seems to envision the Gentile mission where Mark and Luke seem to allude to the coming Gentile domination of Israel and the destruction of Jerusalem.

The response is *me genoito*, the only place outside of Paul where this phrase is used. Its meaning here is, "May this story not happen." Jesus uses Scripture to say that it is inevitable.

Luke records Jesus looking (*emblemsas*) at the leaders and, just as it was for Peter (22:61), it must have been a penetrating look.

The quote is from Ps. 118:22. It is a prophecy of the Messiah (1 Peter 2:4 ff; Acts 4:11). Luke cuts the quote short and adds a threatening warning from Jesus (Is. 8:14; Dan. 2:44). Some ancient authorities also add the threat to the Matthew account after the quote of Ps. 118:22, 23.

The Matthew account includes the meaning of the parable. The kingdom of God will be taken away from Israel and given to a people that will give to God the fruits of a good relationship with Him.

From what follows it is evident that the religious leaders knew that Jesus was referring to them in the parable. Jesus was pointing out to them that their rejection of Him is in fact the rejection of the long awaited Messiah.

Because of their increasing bitterness (*ezetesan* — aorist) toward Him, they sought all the more to get rid of Him. Only the fear of what the people might do kept them from immediate action. They would wait for another time.

God Forbid!

A Warning from the Parable of the Wicked Tenants

- I. God's gracious election of Israel. God elected Israel as His children, His long work of grace was with them throughout Old Testament history. Their response was to be one of honor and praise (see Is. 43:20-21). When the

fullness of time came, Israel rejected the stone (Jesus) for the former things (story of Lent). The punishment was the end of their sonship with God.

- II. God's gracious election of us as the new Israel. We now stand in His work of grace through Jesus Christ our Lord. Ours is to be a response of praise and honor (Is. 43:20-21). We are to count everything as loss (Phil. 3:8-14); however, it is possible for us to reject Him for the former things by relying on the Law, reason, money, popularity, lusts, the things of the old Adam. The punishment is the same; we lose our sonship. God forbid!

The Lenten season calls us to a new repentance and a deeper commitment to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

James F. Schnackenberg

SUNDAY OF THE PASSION

Deuteronomy 32:36-39

Philippians 2:5-11

Luke 19:28-40 or

Luke 22:1-23:56 (long)

Luke 23:1-49 (short)

As Lent may be considered a season of repentance, preparation, and waiting for the culmination of our Lord's passion, so Holy Week may be seen as a week of welcome in which we receive the Christ as our Messiah whom God both gave over to death and crowned with life on our behalf. The recurrent description of the salvation and deliverance which God has prepared for his people make this group of lessons most appropriate for the celebration of the royal reception Christ received in Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday. Each lesson echoes the fulfillment of God's promise to save His people and encourages us to welcome Him alone as Lord and King.

One thread of thought common to the lessons for this day is the contrast between man's grand expectations of how God's salvation should appear and the actual form in which God reveals His saving hand. The Song of Moses in Deut. 32 proclaims the greatness and faithfulness of the true God. He alone can deliver His people. The regal gods fashioned in palaces and temples of human design are helpless.

The Epistle reminds us that the mark of Christ's incarnation was His humility of service rather than the predictable

pomp and splendor which might be accorded the very Son of God. It is His humble service which leads to our salvation and to His exaltation.

The Gospel pericopes highlight both the expectations of royalty on Palm Sunday and the intrigue of the passion during Holy Week. Here we are faced with the incongruity of Christ being welcomed as a king and then crucified as a criminal. This combined emphasis is reflected by the selection of dual texts for the sermon, Luke 19:35-38 and 23:32-38.

Jesus Christ—King or Criminal?

Introduction: What a week of incongruous events! Christ is welcomed as a king but put to death as a criminal. Christ is crucified as a criminal between two criminals by soldiers whose job it was to crucify criminals, and yet the inscription on his cross labels Him a king. Many observing the events of these days must have wondered, "What about this Jesus of Nazareth, was He a king or a criminal?"

- I. The world received, then rejected its King.

A. *On Palm Sunday Jesus entered as a King.* 1. Jesus entered the city riding on a donkey. The donkey has had a lot of bad press in our culture. He has been billed as one of the most lowly and humble of the beasts of burden, a liability to one's reputation. It was not so in the time of our Lord. This sure-footed, loyal, and gentle beast was quite likely to be stabled in royal palaces. It was quite common for a king to be welcomed in a city of his rule riding on a donkey. It was a mark of dignity and rank. While the horse showed intention of military and political conquest, the donkey was an emblem of peace and good will in which the King would be attentive to the needs of his subjects. 2. Garments were placed on the donkey and on the road. When Jehu was crowned, his captains put garments under him as a sign of submission to his royal authority. 3. Cut branches of palms and flowers were strewn in the way as a sign of exuberant joy and triumph. 4. Great shouts of praise accompanied His entrance.

B. On Good Friday Jesus was crucified as a criminal. They rejected His kingship which did not bring military conquest and power but challenged the religious leaders of the people. They accused Him of crimes and tried Him as a criminal. They put Him to death as an enemy of the state and a hazard to society. They nailed Him to a cross between two notorious bandits to be sure there was no mistake about their judgment.

II. The world needs a king.

A. It needs a king who is different from worldly kings. It does not need a king who is criminal in the treatment of his subjects, who is a tyrant lording his power over others, or who is a political manipulator whose reign is contingent upon the momentary power he wields.

B. It needs a king who can keep things together when the world seems to be coming apart at the seams. People need something to hold on to when it appears they are losing their grip on life. 1. When flood waters ripped through Wilkes-Barre, Pa., they plunged families into disaster and scooped the labors of lifetimes into piles of useless rubble. In a few short months that valley besieged by destruction saw a 50 percent rise in the suicide rate. Mental and emotional disorders increased at an alarming rate, and admissions to mental hospitals increased by one third. There was a rise in the death rate among older residents and crime escalated sharply. 2. Joyous praises of the long-awaited peace in Vietnam were muffled by reports of carnage in Cambodia.

Those designated to survey the peace could not keep up with the minute-by-minute violations of the cease fire, and their airships could not escape the rockets fired under the truce. 3. Crime, intrigue, terrorism, danger, and fear of every kind have become the order of the day in our world.

III. God gave the world a King. His name is Jesus Christ.

A. He is Lord over all. His authority is of the Father, God our heavenly Father. His rule is here in this disintegrating world of ours. His mission is to redeem rebels and to reform those who have turned their backs on God. His power is over sin, that insidious disease that creeps into human hearts and destroys them. His promise is life to the dying, eternal life with Him. He came in peace to give His subjects rest. He gave His life so that we might live.

B. He is King even though nailed to a cross. When they raised that cross above that hill outside of the city gate, they raised God's Son to His final victory over sin and Satan himself. The kind of king God sent could be nailed down to a cross and still conquer. He could do that because he was God's Son who had come to be our King, to die for our sins, and to give us the victory of eternal life.

Conclusion: How will we welcome Him? Every heart has its throne to exalt Him and its Golgotha to crucify Him. We need Him as King. We need Him to rule in our hearts and in our world. We need to welcome Him as King and as Lord.

Walter J. Warneck Jr.