

SELECTING TEXTS FOR LENTEN SERIES

The pericopic systems and series of texts preserved to us today do not make provision for special midweek services through the Lenten season. Therefore special series and sermon books for the Lenten season are in demand. The history of special Lenten sermons, however, goes back into the antiquity of the Christian Church. Such sermons are found in the writings of Chrysostom, Augustine, Cyril of Jerusalem and others. Their sermons shared the characteristics of the early Lenten observance. The observance of Lent also was of very early origin and from its beginning was penitential in character. The present duration of this season dates from the time of Gregory the Great, about 600 AD. Since Sundays are not part of the penitential Passion season because of their festival character, it is particularly fitting and profitable to have special midweek Lenten services using specifically Lenten texts and sermons.

The somewhat ascetic spirit of the early Lenten observance became patently legalistic as the Church grew in power and influence as regards civil life. Some of this pietistic influence is seen today even in evangelical circles. To Luther and the Lutheran Church belongs the credit for restoring the Lenten season to its true character, that is, to a celebration of the great acts of salvation worked by Christ. It is this evangelical character of the Passion season that must become the guiding principle for our consideration of series of texts for the Lenten season.

In the development of the theme assigned I shall not attempt to uncover anything new, but I shall merely restate principles known to all who have studied Homiletics at our Seminary, and then shall add what is probably the main purpose for assigning this essay, namely, suggestions as to typical series.

The principles governing the selecting of a series of texts already prepared and the principles governing the originating of a new series are evidently identical and shall be treated together. It might be well to state first those principles governing the selection of texts which are true for any sermon, and especially any casual sermon. These principles, gleaned from various homiletics books, might be summed up as follows:

1. A text should form a complete thought, one worthy of presentation, which assumes that it be neither too short, nor too long. Naturally the thought content and not the number of words determines whether a text is too short or too long.
2. A text should be rich in doctrinal and ethical content. The text should present the essentials of salvation, not merely some catchy thought.

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3. The text should be lucid and not strained to fit a preacher's topic nor his series of texts.
4. The text should be fitting for the occasion, in the case of Lenten series, it should be full of the color of the Passion story. (Note: An interesting approach in several recent series is to use other Biblical texts to elucidate and to apply the Truths of historical Passion texts)

In speaking of Lenten texts in particular there are certain principles, much sinned against, which need stressing. Perhaps chief of all is the principle that in our Lenten sermons the Passion of our Lord must remain central. It seems almost too rudimentary to repeat this principle. And yet a goodly number of published series of sermons violate this principle. What the case may be with the unpublished we cannot judge. We believe, however, that this is a principle which should be very carefully observed.

The heart and soul of all Christian faith and hope rests on the events commemorated during Lent. During the other seasons of the festival half of the Church Year we sing the praises of God for those specific acts of salvation being celebrated: Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, Pentecost. During the Trinity season we speak of the wondrous effect of the acts of salvation on the Christian heart and life. Is it not strange then that during the Passion season we find sermons which preach of man and what he will and should do for God? This is the season of the Lamb of God, sacrificed for our sins. This is the Holy of Holies of the Church Year, when we stand in awe at the display of the love and justice of God in dramatic action before the eyes of all mankind. What else then can be the prime subject of our Lenten sermons but this great act of redemption through the sacrifice of Christ? Surely, the number one principle governing the selecting of Lenten texts is that Christ and the Cross remain central. It is not necessary, however, to go to the extreme of straining to include the term "Cross" in all the themes for 16 different historical texts as in A. Doerffler's "The Cross Still Stands."

There are Lenten series which, though speaking of the characteristics of Christ, leave the Cross and emphasize truths that could just as well be preached any time of the year, using texts far removed from Christ's Passion. An example of this type is entitled: "Christ's No." The individual sermon themes indicate the emphasis: "No Wilfulness", "No Violence", "No Insincerity", "No Curiosity", "No Sentimentalism", "No Self-indulgence", "No Hatred." The significance of the Cross is lost in stressing merely the fine qualities of Christ.

That Christ and the Cross must remain central in our Lenten series does not mean that we shall, year after year, make a mere recital of the events of Holy Week the whole of our sermons. Luther in his House Postil on the Gospels writes: "Let him who wishes properly to preach on or commemorate the suffering of our Lord Jesus discourse not only on how Christ was delivered to the Gentiles, scourged, spit

upon, and nailed to the cross. That is mere history, which a person shall indeed always preach and know, but that is not enough. You shall also know and believe that Christ suffered such things for your sins, that God laid them on Him, that in perfect obedience He bore and paid for them, so that, when you realize that you are a sinner and have deserved God's everlasting wrath and damnation, you may yet not despair, but comfort yourself with this suffering and satisfaction of our Lord Christ."

As Luther indicates we are concerned in our choice of texts and sermons that our people are led to appropriate the facts of the Passion Gospel for their own hearts and lives. The events must be portrayed and referred to in such a way that the hearer knows this is for him, that this has an effect on his fate and life.

This means that our application in our Lenten sermons should consist primarily in the reaction of the regenerate heart to the redemptive act of Christ. Therefore application of the truths of the Passion story to our lives is fitting, but it must be preceded by appropriation of the saving deeds of Christ by the regenerate heart.

We feel that sermons stressing primarily sanctification are out of place in this Season of the Redemption. This is the season for Christ and Him crucified. A series such as the one entitled "Dangerous Distractions" tacks sermons emphasizing various phases of the sanctified life on to Jesus and the characters of the Passion story. The various sermons treat: "Jesus, the Jews, and Idolatry", "Jesus, Judas, and Money", "Jesus, Peter, and Bad Company", "Jesus, Herod, and Amusements", "Jesus, Pilate, and War", "Jesus, Pilate and Sophistication". Here the weaknesses of people who happened to be connected with Christ and His Passion crowd out the significance of Jesus' suffering and death. Another more recent example is "The Lamb and the Blessed" by William Elfert and Daniel Brockhoff. The authors relate events of the Passion story to the Beatitudes and thus tend to emphasize the godly virtues displayed by Christ in His Passion which should be found in the Christian as well. Any season and many non-Passion texts would serve as well or better for such sermons.

Biographical series, usually featuring the persons who were with Christ in His last hours, should also direct the hearer to Christ rather than to the personality of the subject. In some series Christ and His work are viewed through the eyes of the subject of the sermon. In others Christ's purpose is emphasized and presented in the spiritual experience of the subjects of the series. In this way Christ and His work still have the central position and the inclusion of the personality and experiences of the subjects of the series serve to heighten the importance of Christ and His work. Such series also can make easier the personal identification of the hearer with the events of the Passion.

Both the work of Christ in His Passion and above all the results of His work present so many saving truths that we should not be at a loss for texts to use for our Lenten sermons. However, at times we have some difficulty in presenting these truths in a manner which

is as clear, compelling, and interesting as we know the Truths themselves to be. At times we are at a loss to find a unifying thought for our series of sermons. A series which presents a logical and clear outline makes for better comprehension, interest, and even promotion. It surely is not heresy to phrase our general series and individual sermon themes interestingly, unless we obscure the evangelical and reverent spirit of our message. The inspired account of the Passion history is truly dynamic and dramatic and our presentation should not obscure this, but rather emulate it. One is somewhat jarred, however, by themes that seem merely to be an attempt to be different. We cite as an example the series: "Behold, the Suffering Savior!"

1. By moonlight -
2. By torchlight -
3. By Lamplight and Firelight -
4. In the gray dawn -
5. In Morning Light -
6. In Sunlit Streets -
7. In Noonday Darkness.

We feel that a certain cohesiveness of subject material is essential to a good Lenten series. The interest of the hearer is sustained and a sense of anticipation exists through the series of sermons. It is well for us to stay within the limits of one of the general types of Lenten series in any one Lenten season. Some of the types are the historical, the biographical, the doctrinal, and the prophetic.

Under historical we group those series that follow the Savior through the events of His Passion more or less chronologically. Surely this will remain the most popular type of Lenten series in that it presents the simple, but grand truths of the Passion Gospel proper. A special group under this heading would be those series on the Savior's Last Words, which, by their nature, often are also doctrinal in character.

Under biographical we think of those series that feature other persons connected with the Passion story. The doctrinal series often speak of the results of the redemption of Christ as it applies to us and our lives. In the prophetic series we have those that use the Old Testament prophecies or types of the suffering of our Lord. Here, incidentally, lies a very rich field for striking Lenten sermons.

On the sheets presented you are various series in outline, gleaned from books owned and borrowed, as well as one original series for each of the categories mentioned above. This is not meant to be a list of the best, nor of very good series. We hope that they will rather serve as illustrations of what has been presented previously and may also serve as examples for debate relative to the principles stated and discussed.

N. Berg, 1/27/64, Plymouth, Michigan

SOME TYPICAL SERIES OF LENTEN TEXTS

HISTORICAL:

- Theme: CALVARY'S MOURNFUL MOUNTAIN CLIMB

Purpose: To behold the sin of the world and its consequences.  
To see a sinless soul tortured by our sin.  
To hear the reason from the lips of Christ Himself.

We do not journey alone, but with men of today and of that time. Go with those who were connected with Christ and apply their experiences in the light of Christ's last Words to yourself and your life.

- I. With Peter and Hear a Forgiving Lord, Your Savior from Sin.  
(Luke 23: 33-34)
- II. With Dismas and Hear a Gracious Lord, Your Savior from Condemnation.  
(Luke 23: 40-43)
- III. With John and Hear a Loving Lord, Your Savior from Care.  
(John 19: 26-27)
- IV. With Judas' Soul and Hear a Forsaken Man, Your Savior from Despair.  
(Matthew 27: 26)
- V. With Simon of Cyrene and Hear a Suffering Man, Your Savior from Sorrow.  
(John 19: 28)
- VI. With the Centurion and Hear a Victorious Lord, Your Savior from Damnation.  
(John 19: 30)
- VII. With Nicodemus and Hear a Glorious Lord, Your Savior from All Evil.  
(Luke 23: 46)

- Theme: A LAMB GOES UNCOMPLAINING FORTH (A. Hoenecke)

- I. The Savior in Victorious Prayer (Matt. 26: 36-46)
- II. The Savior Betrayed (Matt. 26: 47-50)
- III. The Savior Denied (Matt. 26: 58, 69-75)
- IV. The Savior Accused and Condemned (Matt. 26: 59-66)
- V. The Savior Lamented (Luke 23: 27-31)
- VI. The Savior Forsaken by God (Matt. 27: 45-47)
- VII. The Dying Savior (Matt. 27: 50-51, 54-56)

- Theme: WERE YOU THERE? (E. Heintzen, CPH 1958)

- I. When He was Betrayed? (Matt. 26: 47-56)
- II. When He was Denied? (Luke 22: 54-62)
- III. When He was Accused? (Luke 23: 1-5)
- IV. When He was Condemned? (Matt. 27: 24-26)
- V. When He was Crowned with Thorns? (Matt. 27: 27-30)
- VI. When He was Crucified? (Luke 23: 32-38)
- VII. When He Gave the Holy Supper? (Luke 22: 19-20)
- VIII. When He was Laid in the Tomb? (John 19: 38-42)
- IX. When He Rose from the Grave? (Romans 6: 4-5)

HISTORICAL: (Cont.)

- Theme: SEVEN TIMES HE SPOKE (O. Ricard, Augsburg 1960)

- I. The Savior's Intercession
- II. The Cross and the Loved Ones
- III. What the Three Crosses Declare
- IV. The Darkness of Good Friday
- V. The Divine Thirst
- VI. The Man and the Task
- VII. Going Home

- Theme: THE VOICE OF THE CROSS (M. Loane, Zondervan 1963)

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|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Int. The Victim-Victor       | (Luke 23: 33; Matt. 27:36) |
| I. The Redeemer-Suppliant    | (Luke 23: 34)              |
| II. The Savior-Sovereign     | (Luke 23: 39-43)           |
| III. Christus Consolatur     | (John 19: 25-27)           |
| IV. The Martyr-Mediator      | (Matt. 27: 45-46)          |
| V. The Savior-Sufferer       | (John 19: 28-29)           |
| VI. Christus Consumator      | (John 19: 30)              |
| VII. The Redeemer-Triumphant | (Luke 23: 46)              |
| Conc. The Ransom-Rescue      | (John 19: 30)              |

BIOGRAPHICAL:

- Theme: CHRIST'S SUFFERING AT THE HANDS OF FRIENDS.

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|---|-------------------|
| I. Judas, the False Friend                      | (Luke 22: 47-48)  |
| II. Peter, the Overconfident Friend             | (Matt. 26: 33)    |
| III. John, the Frightened Friend                | (Matt. 26: 56)    |
| IV. Daughters of Jerusalem, the Weeping Friends | (Luke 23: 27-31)  |
| V. Dismas, the Wayward Friend                   | (Matt. 27: 41-44) |
| VI. Joseph of Arimathaea, the Timid Friend      | (John 19: 38)     |
| VII. The Christian, the Unworthy Friend         | (I Timothy 1:15)  |

- Theme: I REMEMBER THE SAVIOR'S DEATH (Robt. Hoyer, NPH, 1955)

(Letters written to St. John by Witnesses of the Passion)

By: Judas - Caiaphas - Members of the Mob - Pontius Pilate -  
 Nicodemus - Young Man of Nain - Apostle Paul - Father of  
 Dismas - Mary, the Mother of Jesus - The Man Born Blind -  
 Zacchaeus - The Rich Young Ruler - One of the Children  
 Jesus Blessed - Peter.

DOCTRINAL:

- Theme: THE TESTIMONY OF CHRIST'S ENEMIES CONCERNING HIS PASSION

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| I. The Sanhedrin: "He is Guilty of Death"  | (Matt. 26:66)    |
| II. Caiaphas: "It is Expedient for Us that One Man Should Die<br>for the People" |                  |
| III. Pilate: "He is Sinless."  | (John 18: 39)    |
| IV. Chief Priests: "He Saved Others"   | (Matt. 27:41-44) |
| V. Centurion: "He is the Son of God."  | (Matt. 27:50-54) |
| VI. Pharisees: "He is the Hope of the World".                                    | (John 12: 19)    |
| VII. Scribes: "This Man Receiveth Sinners"                                       | (Luke 15: 2)     |
| VIII. Roman Court Superscription: "He is the King of the Jews".                  | (John 19:19)     |

- Theme: SALVATION (Harry E. Olsen in "When Christ Went to Calvary"CPH

- I. Salvation in the Scriptures (Matt. 26: 54)
- II. A Substitute Secures Salvation (Matt. 27: 21)
- III. A Ransom acquires Salvation (Matt. 20: 28)
- IV. The Sinner's Friend Assures Salvation (I Tim. 1:15)
- V. Salvation in the Judgment (Matt. 25: 31-32)
- VI. God and Christ Will our Salvation (Mark 14: 36)
- VII. The Church Proclaims Salvation' (Mark 16: 15)
- VIII. The Resurrection Certifies Salvation (Matt. 28: 5-6)

- Theme: THE CROSS OF CHRIST (Wm. Buegge, CPH 1963)

- I. ...My Obedience to God (Luke 22: 41-46/Phil.2:8)
- II. ...My Innocence before God (Matt.26:66/Rom.3:19)
- III. ...My Power from God (John 18:36.37/ I Cor. 1:18)
- IV. ...My Wisdom of God (Matt. 27: 17/ I Cor. 1:21)
- V. ...My Peace with God (Luke 23: 27-31/ Phil. 4:7)
- VI. ...My Salvation from God (Matt. 27: 34-38/ I Cor.1:30.31)

PROPHETICAL:

- Theme: OUR SAVIOR'S SORROWS FORESHADOWED IN THE PSALMS

- I. Our Savior Betrayed by His Own (Ps. 41: 9)
- II. Our Savior Deserted By His Friends (Ps. 38:11)
- III. Our Savior Rejected by Religious Leaders (Ps. 118;22)
- IV. Our Savior Shamed by His People (Ps. 69: 7ff)
- V. Our Savior Crucified by All Sinners (Ps. 22:13-16)
- VI. Our Savior Unpitied by His Enemies (Ps. 69: 19-21)
- VII. Our Savior Sacrificed by Himself (Ps. 23: 5)
- VIII. Our Savior Forsaken by God (Ps. 22: 1.2)

- Theme: ZECHARIAH'S PROPHECIES CONCERNING THE HOLY WEEK  
(Concordia Pulpit, 1952)

- I. Searching the Prophets (I Peter 1: 10-12)
- II. God's Servant, the Branch (Zech. 3:8b-10)
- III. A Fountain for Sin (Zech. 13:1)
- IV. The Sword and the Shepherd (Zech. 13: 7-9)
- V. He Whom They Have Pierced (Zech. 12:10)
- VI. The Potter's Field (Zech. 11: 12-13)
- VII. Rejoice! Thy King Cometh! (Zech. 9: 9-11)

- Theme: OLD TESTAMENT TYPES OF CHRIST  
(H. J. Schuh in Lenten outlines and Sermons - Golladay)

- I. The Offering of Isaac (Gen. 22: 1-13)
- II. Joseph (Gen. 41: 46-49)
- III. The Passover (Exodus 12: 3-13)
- IV. The Scapegoat (Lev. 16: 21-22)
- V. Burnt Offering (Lev. 1:1-9)
- VI. The High Priest (Lev. 8: 6-12)
- VII. Manna, the Bread of Life (Exodus 16: 35)
- VIII. The Serpent of Brass (Numbers 21: 4-9)

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