

# Homiletical Helps: Lenten Preaching

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Much has been presented in classrooms and published in books about Lenten preaching. Every year one expects another author to appear in print with a new series of Lenten sermons. Much of that which has been offered has been good, some not so good. This review of Lenten preaching doesn't promise to add anything new. It does, however, have the purpose of reminding *Quarterly* readers of a few basic concerns pertaining to the subject which may have been stated before but which many preachers will find worthy of reconsideration as they prepare for another Lenten season.

Our focus here, of course, is on sermons prepared for special services during the Lenten season, a season which in our day begins on Ash Wednesday and continues for six weeks through Holy Week. We recall that a special Lenten observance began with the early Christians, who remembered with fasting and special devotions the "forty hours" when Jesus was crucified and lay in the grave. This was extended to two weeks, beginning with Passion Sunday, and later to forty days in remembrance of the Lord's temptation. Since Sundays in those earlier years were not regarded as "fast days," the forty days from Ash Wednesday to Easter excluding Sundays were designated as the Lenten *Quadragesima*, probably in the days of Gregory the Great.

While the medieval church observed Lent as a time of special preparation of catechumens for baptism at Easter as well as a season of special penitence and abstinence from worldly pleasures, in the Lutheran church it took on a more contemplative emphasis. Many custom's which seemed to be encouraging a spirit of work-righteousness were eliminated. The story of Christ's suffering and death as reflected in Bugenhagen's mosaic account of the "History of the Passion As Recorded in the Four Gospels" received prominent consideration. Today most of our churches arrange for special services during Lent in which the various steps of Christ's passion history are reviewed in a series of midweek services from Ash Wednesday into Holy Week.

This bit of background brings us to our first reminder concerning Lenten preaching: "The best Lenten sermon is the passion story itself." The history of Lent in the Lutheran church reminds us of this. Almost every Lutheran homiletical treatise emphasizes this. Most Lenten series which are suggested for use take this direction. Out of this axiomatic principle follows a self-evident course of action, one which can cause problems when preachers wish to exchange pulpits with neighboring pastors during Lent. A story moves from one incident to the next. In the process it takes on a climactic progression. The Lenten story takes us from Gethsemane to Jerusalem to Calvary and to the tomb. Flashbacks disturb the sequence. But how is the pastor who begins the season by preaching in his own pulpit on Ash Wednesday going to be a part of this progression by preaching the same sermon elsewhere several weeks later?

The obvious answer to more effective Lenten preaching lies, of course, in the local pastor doing his own preaching in his own congregation. Which reminds us of the advice of the sainted Professor Irwin Habeck: "Get the experience of preaching five full Lenten series yourself before you agree to a joint venture." Aside from letting his congregation enjoy the rhythm of the season, the preacher himself will experience the joy of spiritual growth rather than the prospect of warming up the same homiletical effort on the same text week after week.

While on the thought of preaching progressively on some phase of the passion history, another important reminder is in place. The passion story can be approached in sequence from various aspects. As any book of Lenten outlines will suggest, there are "Places of the Passion," "Characters of the Passion," "Questions of the Passion," "Voices of the Passion," "Lenten Pronouncements," "Lenten Contrasts," and so on. Some of these approaches sound intriguing. No doubt a skillful preacher can make use of them properly. Several dangers, however, lie in these suggestions. The listener may be impressed, even transfixed, by the perceptive character analysis of a Judas or a Peter, by the shocking behavior of a Herod or a Caiaphas. He may learn some things about a Barabbas or a Dismas or a Testas that he never heard before. His powers of imagination may be greatly aroused by a graphic description of Pilate's judgment hall or the Via Dolorosa, by the travesty of justice

committed during the course of Christ's trial, by the gruesome details of torture inflicted on an innocent person—and in the process somehow be distracted from the real purpose as to why this all took place. As a respected colleague expressed it: "Lenten sermons deserve to be Christocentric, not anthropocentric." Christ's great work of redemption, in other words, deserves to be highlighted in Lenten sermons, with the contributing character or the interesting place or the provocative question or pronouncement receiving ancillary treatment. The sermon should be textually edifying, not cleverly distracting.

It may be worth noting in this same context that the great facts which lie in the message of Christ's suffering, death and resurrection are, homiletically speaking, primarily truths for appropriation rather than application. To put it more simply, what Christ's redemptive work means for a miserable sinner like me takes precedence over how the life of a Judas or a Peter or a Simon of Cyrene can serve me by way of warning or example. Not that the latter need be ignored; it's a matter of priorities!

Ways of highlighting the mighty acts of God can be reflected in the themes which we choose for our Lenten series of sermons. Instead of being satisfied with a series entitled "Characters of the Passion" or "Places of the Passion," why not choose themes like "Sin and Grace in the Passion" or "The Savior's Triumphs in His Passion"? Old Testament texts which prophesy step for step God's plan of salvation as fulfilled by Christ can also serve as a basis for a very satisfactory review of Christ's passion history, both in its historical sequence as well as in its mighty significance. Some time ago our Northwestern Publishing House offered a series centered in "The Savior's Hands," hands which washed the disciples' feet, healed Malchus, were sinless, were bound, were wounded. The satisfying thing about this kind of series, of course, is its focus on the central figure of the passion story throughout and on what his acts of obedience accomplished for a world of sinners.

Rather than to suggest a number of specific texts with themes and parts for Lenten series in this homiletical survey, it would seem preferable to let the preacher himself struggle with the choice of texts and thematic formulations. There are already sufficient books on the market with enough suggestions for adaptation or use. A personal struggle in this matter can add to the preacher's joy and satisfaction as he finds something with which he is comfortable and as he carries through to the finished product.

Because the Lenten season confronts our people with the very heart of God's message of sin and grace, it certainly deserves not only careful advance preparation on the part of the preacher but also adequate publicizing in behalf of his people. Publishing houses carry attractive folders with illustrations to fit to some degree whatever series may have been chosen. These can be used to give advance information to the congregation concerning the Lenten schedule of services for the year, highlighting its theme and sermon series and including an encouragement not only to attend the services for purposes of spiritual growth but also to bring an unchurched friend. These folders can be made available to congregation members in quantity as part of a Lenten-centered outreach program involving personal evangelism. What better time to do this than when our Lutheran church proclaims the very heart of its message! The writer can vouch for the fact that some of his largest adult information classes came about as a direct result of this kind of outreach program, one in which the members did most of the mission work.

One added suggestion pertains to scheduling. There was a time when it was taken for granted that arranging services for a Wednesday evening during Lent was the accepted thing to do. It may be worth asking, if it hasn't been done so already, if this still applies. The average age of our people in many congregations has risen considerably. Perhaps many of our senior citizens would for a number of reasons prefer to attend a morning or an afternoon service. It has also been found that for our younger families services held early in the evening are well received. Children are more ready to attend and also participate in singing special anthems for the service. Parents can attend and if necessary take care of some other obligation later on in the evening. We know how "fully packed" most schedules are these days. One may prefer "the way it always was," but unfortunately it often isn't that way any more.

And so another Lenten season lies before us. Will it be just another hectic time when preachers are expected to preach more often and when people are obligated to attend church more frequently? Or will it be another joyous opportunity for both pastor and people to experience how the preaching of Christ crucified, a

stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, is a demonstration of the power and the wisdom of God? These words are written in the hope and with the prayer that it will be the latter.