

The ILCW Series and the Old Testament

By Ernst H. Wendland

Prof. John Jeske reminded us in a recent conference paper that preaching on the Old Testament, which in bulk “represents three-quarters of the Bible” shows “the ratio of Old Testament sermons to New Testament sermons as perhaps 1:5.” He cautioned against “relegating the Old Testament to a secondary position” and urged “a larger investment of study time and pulpit time” in that portion of Scripture in order to help our people grow spiritually “as they hear familiar doctrines drawn from totally unfamiliar contexts and presented on unfamiliar backgrounds.”ⁱ

This lack of preaching on Old Testament texts is all too true. Most preachers will admit to it. For one thing, it simply takes more time and effort for the busy-busy pastor of today to work with an Old Testament series. Another contributing factor, no doubt, lies in this that the “ancient” or “historic” pericopes taken over by Luther from the Roman series and adapted for his *Kirchenpostille* included few Old Testament selections. For many years there was no Old Testament course of Scripture readings systematically followed in either Roman Catholic or Lutheran churches.

The present Old Testament readings associated with the historic pericopes were selected less than one hundred years ago by a Commission on a Common Liturgy consisting of representatives from various Lutheran church bodies. Although the Old Testament texts selected by this commission follow to some extent other Old Testament series formulated in Europe during the last two centuries (Nitsch, Thomasius, Eisenach, Swedish), it is not always easy to see a clear relationship between the Old Testament reading and the Gospel for the Day, which usually sets the key theme for a Sunday.

The Old Testament series prepared by Frederic H. K. Soll and adopted in 1912 by the Synodical Conference show some improvement in this respect, although a close relationship between Gospel and Old Testament readings is also somewhat obscure at times.

The Scripture readings chosen more recently by the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship (ILCW) try to correct this situation. The Old Testament reading is restored to a more prominent position and recommended for regular reading in the church service as the “First Lesson” for the Sunday. From an explanatory booklet relating to this commission’s choice of Scripture lessons we read: “In almost every instance the Old Testament passage was chosen because it relates to the Gospel. Sometimes it relates to the Epistle, or in rare cases to both.”ⁱⁱ

Relating either Old Testament or Gospel readings to the Epistles in the ILCW series has its difficulties, of course, since readings from a single epistle often extend over a period of several weeks for certain portions of the church year (*lectio continua*). Since the Gospel, however, is chosen to fit the various seasons and festivals of the church year and also sets forth the central thought for the Sunday, the Old Testament text for each Sunday suits this same overall scheme and specific purpose.

A recent Northwestern Publishing House book of *Sermon Studies on the Gospels*, based on the ILCW Series C, illustrates this seasonal approach to the selection of Old Testament readings. The Advent season begins with Jeremiah 33:14–16, which foretells the Savior’s coming as the growth of a “righteous Branch” that would sprout from the family of David. The second reading is Malachi 3:1–4, which prophesies the coming of John the Baptist, God’s own messenger to “prepare the way for the Lord.” In the third Old Testament selection Zephaniah urges God’s faithful remnant to “be glad and rejoice” because he who is “mighty to save” is near at hand (Zph 3:14–18). On the fourth Sunday in Advent we have the words of the prophet Micah as he foretells the very place of the promised Messiah’s birth (Mic 5:2–4). On Christmas Day Isaiah heralds a great deliverance through the birth of a child, a child who has divine names and whose kingdom will have no end (Is 9:2–7). The Sunday after Christmas brings Jeremiah’s words of consolation for the faithful in Israel (Jr 31:10–13), words reechoed and fulfilled through Simeon in the Gospel for the Day. It is not difficult to follow the close relationship between the church year, the Gospel and the Old Testament selection, a relationship which runs consistently with few exceptions throughout the rest of the series.

With this in mind the second Northwestern Publishing House book of sermon studies based on ILCW texts, scheduled for publication this year, will feature *Sermon Studies on the Old Testament*. Series B, which selects most of its Gospel texts from Mark, will be followed. Again there is a striking relationship between the Gospel and the Old Testament selections, one which should whet the appetite of any preacher who is interested in proclaiming Law and Gospel on the basis of Old Testament pericopes. One of the Advent texts, for example is God's promise to David that he will build a house for his servant and through his offspring an everlasting kingdom (2 Sm 7:8–12). How beautifully this prophecy relates to the Gospel for the Day, in which Gabriel tells Mary that the Lord God will give her Son the throne of his father David, and that his kingdom will never end (Lk 1:26–38)! The Epiphany season, in addition to offering rich prophecies from Isaiah concerning the Messianic kingdom (Is 60:1–6; 42:1–7), includes the Lord's revelation of himself to Samuel (1 Sm 3:1–10), his second summons to Jonah (Jon 3:1–5; 10), his promise through Moses concerning the coming of the Great Prophet (Dt 18:15–20), his assurance to the remnant of Israel that he will give them honor and praise “among all the peoples of the earth” (Zph 3:14–20), Elisha's healing of the Aramean commander Naaman (2 Kgs 5:1–14), culminating in Elijah's whirlwind departure from this earth on Transfiguration Sunday. What rich Epiphany fare!

During the Lenten season we have the story of how Abraham is tested as he is told to sacrifice Isaac (Gn 22:1–14), Jacob's reassuring dream at Bethel (Gn 28:10–17), the Covenant Lord's declaration on Sinai, in which he demands honor and respect for himself alone (Ex 2:1–6), the account of the bronze snake (Nu 21:4–9), the Lord's promise of a new covenant of full and free forgiveness (Jr 31:31–34), all leading up to Zechariah's Palm Sunday prophecy of Israel's coming King (Zch 9:9–12). Each of these diverse Lenten texts is closely related to the Markan Gospel selection.

Holy Week offers an interesting Maundy Thursday text, the confirmation of the Sinaitic covenant which is sealed with the blood of sacrifice and includes a fellowship meal with the Lord (Ex 24:3–11). Good Friday, of course, brings us Isaiah's prophetic description of God's humbled and exalted Servant, Jesus Christ (Is 52:13–53:12). What a rich opportunity for presenting an Old Testament God who through prophecies, types and personal action proclaims the same message of sin and grace as he does in the New!

The Easter cycle varies our scriptural diet—as do the other ILCW series—by turning to selections from the book of Acts.

Pentecost brings the familiar revelation of the Lord to Ezekiel as his Spirit breathes life into dry bones (Eze 37:1–14), and on Trinity Sunday we have the Lord's assertion through Moses that he is one in essence, demanding total obedience (Dt 6:4–9). Moses' use of the word “one” in this passage is also to be understood in a Trinitarian sense.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Pentecost season brings texts from fifteen different Old Testament books. Many of these are narrative texts; most are intimately related to the Gospel for the Day. Among these there is the story of the Fall into Sin and the First Promise (Gn 3:9–15), Job's Trials with Afflictions (Job 38:1–11), Ezekiel's Call (Eze 2:2–5), Amos' Defense against Amaziah (Am 7:10–15), Manna and Quail in the Wilderness (Ex 16:2–15), Elijah's Flight from Jezebel (1 Kgs 19:4–8), Solomon's Portrayal of Wisdom (Pr 9:1–6), Joshua's Final Appeal (Jos 24:1–2; 14–18), Moses' Exhortation on the Plains of Moab (Dt 4:1–8), interspersed with texts rich in assurance from Isaiah (Is 35:4–7; 50:4–10) and Jeremiah (Jr 11:18–20; 31:7–9), and closing with Daniel's Vision of the End Times (Dn 12:1–3), Daniel's Vision of the Ancient of Days (Dn 7:9–10), and Daniel's Picture of Christ the King (Dn 7:13–14). What an opportunity to familiarize our people with the richness of our Old Testament heritage!

An example of how the Old Testament selection relates to the Gospel is the text telling how Elijah finds help from the widow at Zarephath (1 Kgs 17:8–16). The Gospel for the Day is the familiar story of the Widow's Offering (Mk 12:41–44). Both accounts show a widow giving up the tangible for the intangible, the certain for the uncertain, and how she receives the Lord's blessing and commendation. A striking comparison.

Contributing toward *Sermon Studies on the Old Testament—Series B*, soon to be published by NPH, were 49 pastors and professors of our synod coming from over 20 states in the U. S. It is gratifying to know that we have men in our synod who busy themselves with Hebrew exegesis, whose homiletical principles reflect a

common approach to sermon writing, and whose positive, gospel-oriented direction predominates. It is to be hoped that this book will encourage more preaching from the Old Testament, supplying our people with a balanced diet from the bountiful table which the Lord our God has set before us.

ⁱ John C. Jeske, "Preaching from the Old Testament," Metropolitan North Pastoral Conference, March 15, 1982.

ⁱⁱ Booklet No. 6 on Contemporary Worship: *The Church Year—Calendar and Lectionary*, p 22.

ⁱⁱⁱ See N. Friedmann's "The Mystery of the Trinity," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, November 1944.