

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

The Word of the Lord Came
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Homiletics

Brief Studies

Book Review

Vol. XXXVIII

November 1967

No. 10

HOMILETICS

INTRODUCTION

The Homiletics section of CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY for the year 1967—68 will present examples of sermons of experimental types designed to reach contemporary hearers in new situations. It will be apparent at once that approaches such as these will not touch certain hearers and will not be pertinent to many standard situations. The Christians attending the weekly celebration of The Holy Communion in the historic liturgical pattern are a different audience from the people attending a midweek Lenten or Advent service which is part of the evangelistic thrust of the congregation. But preaching situations such as these are faced by most pastors. The audience addressed by a student pastor, which may be made up of 60 percent determinedly non-Christian inquirers, is unique, but the sermon preached there may suggest approaches pertinent to every pastor who realizes that many in his congregation have come to hear and not yet to worship. People whose ears are continuously assaulted by the high-key radio and television pitch maker or the technique of the dramatic artist may be reached more effectively by the relatively simple device of the dialog sermon than by the traditional expositional approach of the Lutheran pulpit.

In all this the position of this journal might be phrased in this way. Let it be expounding of the historical Gospel, directed to baptized Christians who have come to worship and to participate in Christian communion. But in order that we might strive to be all things to all men, let us examine techniques that can be tools of the Spirit for reaching those who, having ears, yet hear not.

For those who would find week-by-week sermonic helps the following titles may be useful:

Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets, Martin Franzmann

The Sermon and the Propers, in five volumes, Fred H. Lindemann

Sermonic Studies in two volumes, studies on the standard epistles by various authors

The Concordia Pulpit

In Time . . . For Eternity, Justus P. Kretzmann and George W. Hoyer.

Even more pertinent would be the new techniques of sermon preparation that might be suggested by reviewing the homiletic approach developed by Richard R. Caemmerer in *Preaching for the Church*. All of these volumes are available through Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis.

John R. Sternberg, pastor of Saint Peter Lutheran Church, Schaumburg, Ill., is the author of the dialog sermon in this issue. It is the first of a series of three Advent sermons titled "A Dialog on Doubt." "A Layman's Doubt" was followed by "A Clergyman's Doubt," illustrated by the life of Zacharias, who heard the promise, was made silent, and believed. The third in the series was titled "A Ruler's Doubt" and was based on the life of Herod, who heard the promise, tried to silence it, and perished in disbelief.

Arrangements have been made through the Department of Seminary Relations of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, to make mimeographed copies of the second and third sermons in this series available to those who would be interested. Address your request to the Department of Seminary Relations, 801 De Mun Avenue, St. Louis, Missouri 63105.

Dialog sermons usually develop their point out of a tension or conflict of opinion between the speakers involved. This sermon might be called a dramatic sermon in that it approaches its point more through reflective conversation than argument. The author indicated that these sermons were delivered by the two speakers in deliberately dramatic style, one standing at the lectern and the other in the pulpit. DI refers to the first speaker in the dialog, DII to the second.

One of the potential difficulties of a dialog

is that the actual point of the sermon becomes lost in the conversation. That the potential strength of the sermon also lies in the impact that dramatic dialog can assert makes the risk worthwhile. It would be interesting, however, to see how many different problems are developed in the various adaptations this sermon will undergo, problems of being drafted into the Vietnam War, problems of divorce, of abortion, of civil disobedience, of open housing.

An even more serious problem, present in all sermonizing but peculiar to the dialog, is that the Gospel is talked about, is referred to, rather than proclaimed and made to happen again. Another interesting comparison that will be drawn in many pulpits in which this sermon is adapted is the way in which what God does for us through Jesus Christ is made a present reality. The proof of God's involvement and help in our lives is not only a promise made and fulfilled to Joseph but a living Jesus Christ, with us now, whose Spirit has given us new life and new power.

This Advent series is offered with the sincere prayer and hope that others might be stimulated to a more imaginative presentation of the Gospel that will make the familiar message of Christ's coming more relevant and interesting to capture the hearts of our modern day.

A DIALOG ON DOUBT

I. "A Layman's Doubt"

MATTHEW 1:18-25

Dialogue I-1

There goes Joseph.

You will recognize him, I am sure, as a religious man.

He can trace his ancestry through the royal line to David.

He is a very pious man, too, who carefully follows the beliefs of the Jewish faith. You will observe, as well, that he is a law-abiding citizen.

He lives a respectable life in the community.

He pays his taxes—and after all, what more can the government expect?

You will notice from the tools he carries that he is a laborer.

He works as a carpenter in his small shop on the side of his house down at the end of the street.

He is a good workman and people like his work.

But he is not much of a man to talk.

I wonder, just what he could be thinking about?

Dialogue II-2

I have been thinking lately . . .

for a man has plenty of time to think on my job:

How wonderful are the promises of God!

There is that wonderful promise of salvation the almighty God gave to father Adam and mother Eve in the Garden of Eden in the beginning of time. It has been repeated over and over again, as when God spoke to the serpent in the hearing of our first parents: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." (Gen. 3:15)

There is the promise given to father Abraham when God said: ". . . and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves . . ." (Gen. 22:18)

And to Jacob God said: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, . . . until he comes to whom it belongs; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples." (Gen. 49:10)

Moses furthermore told us: "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren—him you shall heed." (Deut. 18:15)

Seven hundred years ago Isaiah foretold: "For to us a Child is born, to us a Son is

given; and the government will be upon His shoulder, and His name will be called 'Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.'" (Is. 9:6)

And Micah said: "But you, O Bethlehem Eph'rathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for Me One who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days." (Micah 5:2)

But like my ancient forefather David, I come to say: "O that deliverance for Israel would come out of Zion!" (Ps. 14:7)

Can these promises of God ever be fulfilled? When I look at this cruel Roman government —

making war, taxing the people so heavily, living so wickedly—that day of fulfillment seems so very far away, if ever it will come.

And as I wonder if it will ever be so, I begin to doubt.

But I must hasten back to my job.

A man's mind can do strange things to him,
and soon he only knows doubt;
left without faith, he has nothing on which to hold but only more questions to ask his searching soul.

I must get busy; idleness is the devil's playground, and he will soon have me doubt even that I am!

There is that yoke to make for the oxen of Andrew the trader, a plow to shape for Peter the tiller of the soil, and a chest to fashion for Mary's dowry.

DI-3

Life goes on as usual, doesn't it, until suddenly it seems as though the bottom itself drops out when we are confronted with a problem.

No man is an island.

We live not only by ourselves and to ourselves.

We are related to each other.

There is Joseph and his last mentioned concern — Mary.

She is a very pious and devout follower of Israel.

Recently she was promised to Joseph.

They should make a wonderful pair — matched in piety and faithfulness to all that is prescribed for God's people.

But you will notice, too, and this, if you pardon me,

brings thinking men to question and to doubt, for her condition is a delicate one.

Can men no longer trust one another?

Are these unreasonable suspicions?

Now, after all, what can you expect?

I am no fool.

Haven't you your doubts about others when all evidence seems to point otherwise?

Why, you're just like me, and perhaps like Joseph too.

What will he do?

DII-4

Of course, I am shocked!

Life has dealt me a severe blow.

What shall I think?

I love Mary.

Her tender glances melt my bachelor heart.

Her soft touch warms my very soul.

Her sweet words caress my thoughts.

She is a pious and devout child of God.

She will make me a good wife and one to run my household!

She will make a fine mother to care for my children!

Ah, but right there is the rub!

Have I been blinded by love and duped by my own thoughts?

Can I be mistaken about her?

After all, it is just as you said.

Can facts be denied?

And then, all this is supported by her own confession.

She is with child.
 What shall I think? Have I no room to
 doubt?

DI-5

Why are you hesitating? You know what
 to do.

Any self-respecting and righteous person
 knows the answer and the action that is
 to follow.

It is stated in the Law:

"Thou shalt not commit adultery."

"Whosoever is found in adultery should
 be put to death."

You have been spurned for the love of an-
 other.

Your love has been betrayed.

"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a
 tooth," I say.

DII-6

But this I cannot. And if I must be a fool,
 then let me be for God's sake; and if my
 doubts prevail, then let it be for Mary's
 sake.

I am sorely tried.

I tenderly love her and love her still.

You cannot turn love, as you moderns say,
 off and on like hot and cold water.

She has confided in me and tells me of her
 innocence.

What is more — if, if I can only remove
 those devilish questions that come to
 my mind; if only I can brush away their
 web of entanglement that catches me
 in their doubts, for Mary tells me an
 angel came to her and announced that
 she was to be the chosen handmaid of
 the Lord and that what is done is by the
 Holy Ghost!

Is this not too much to believe —
 and if not to believe, then to be left with
 doubt?

I am torn by my love for Mary.

I am bound by the law of God.

I am caught in the reason of my doubt.

Is there no way out — perchance faith, hope,
 and love?

How can this be?

DI-7

Guess we all have been troubled with ques-
 tions like that, which have given rise to
 our own "well-founded" doubts.

We are given to our likes and dislikes.

We know what is right and what is wrong.

Our judgment is blinded by both, and we
 are left with the reason of our doubt.

But this situation is an impossible one!

Who can believe it?

How simple can a man be?

Remember that time you found a dent in
 your car?

Your wife said she got it in the parking lot
 while shopping.

But you know how she drives.

Remember that time your husband came
 home so late?

He said he was working overtime — got
 caught in a traffic jam and was delayed.

But you just knew he was out someplace.

Remember your own suspicions that cooled
 your love and tempered your reason?

How mistrust developed and respect
 was lost, and you were left with nothing
 but doubt?

DII-8

When in doubt, they say, wait.

Impatience cannot.

Men get so wrapped up in resolving their
 problems right now that they cannot
 wait but must blunder on.

I was so overcome by my doubts, and to
 be honest I had them, I had to wait.

Finally I resolved: I'll not expose her to
 shame, for I love her; I'll not put her
 away, for now she needs me.

I found it difficult to accept her special revel-
 ations, for really, could God be interested
 in us to become so involved with us in
 this strange way?

Nevertheless, I will be compassionate, especially when there are so many doubts; at least I can give her the benefit of the doubt.

DI-9

How often have you and I been caught up in our doubts?

What a misery it is to live in mistrust!

What a dilemma to live in doubt!

It is rather distressing not to have the answer for your predicament in life.

To question even that answer is only to create further doubt and deepen your anxiety.

Is there no way for us to remove our doubt?

DII-10

Why not pray?

You men of the 20th century have so embroiled yourselves in the here and now that you have lost your perspective to the heavenly and eternal.

In my struggle with doubt I prayed.

Indeed I had my questions as any thinking man would.

Then I recalled to mind the resources of my faith and drew on the promises of God. There was that blessed promise given by Isaiah: "Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel" (Is. 7:14). "Immanuel"—why, that means "God with us." God would be with us!

If, then, I come to remember this

while I still have my doubts about others and their dealing with me, dare I charge God with human foibles and idiosyncrasies?

DI-11

Do you mean that you would take such an earthly matter as this and with all those marks of shame to God—and speak to Him about it?

Can God be that interested in me?

Can God be that interested in my problems?

Should not I search out the most expedient way for myself and resolve my problems and predicament to the best of my ability?

DII-12

Let me only say, God hears and knows the doubts of His people.

To deliver me from my doubts God in His grace sent an angel to me in a dream. The angel called me by name and said: "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and His name shall be called Emmanuel" (which means, God with us). (Matt. 1:20-23)

By this I was told that I should take Mary as my wife and that the Child conceived in her was of the Holy Ghost.

Does not the voice of God dispel doubt and instill faith to motivate us into action? It did for me.

DI-13

Or can it not also create in us still further doubt?

You say you had a dream and in this vision an angel came to you and told you these things.

This I can understand, for there are people still today who have dreams and visions.

How can I know whether they are of God or of Satan?

How can I be sure of their interpretation?

How can I believe that God is interested in me and reaches into my life in some strange and wonderful way?

DII-14

When God speaks — either through the voice of His messengers or through the written page of His Holy Word — He gives us the power to believe.

His Word by the power of the Holy Ghost that came upon Mary produced in me faith and removed my doubt.

This is the Word of God and not of men.

By His loving grace He seeks to reach out and win your soul. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God." (Eph. 2:8)

As to the vision, these are to be understood and interpreted only in accordance to the revealed Word and will of God as you have it in His promises in the Bible.

He supports His own prophecies and promises with His fulfillment in due time. "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and His name shall be called Emmanuel (which means, God with us)." (Matt. 1:23)

Here you have its meaning given by God Himself.

Jesus is to be the Savior — yours and mine.

He is Immanuel — "God with us."

"If God be for us, then who can be against us?"

DI-15

And this is enough for you
to calm your fears,
to remove your doubts,
to accept Mary as your wife,
to believe that Jesus is your Savior?

I wish I could be like that.

You know, I have so many unresolved questions —

how to make ends meet,
how to live in trust with other people,
what is going to happen
to my family,

to my job,
to this country I live in.

It is not, if you can believe me, that I don't believe in God. I do, but can God be interested in my life, enter into the everyday affairs that concern me, fill me with trust, faith, hope, and with love for other people and for Him?

DII-16

He did it for me.

When I let God speak to me through His Holy Word,

I trusted in His promise of a Savior,

I came to deplore my own sinfulness,

I knew my own lack of ability to make things right with God,

I accepted His plan for the saving of my body and soul.

This yearning, friend, was not mere wishful thinking by which I lifted myself by my own bootstraps to a fantasy of something better.

God provided the power to believe — to accept His promises in their marvelous fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

God filled my life with trust, faith, hope, and love; and I became a new man!

DI-17

Do you mean life can be different?

That there is something more to life than to grub for my daily existence?

That there is something more to life than to grab at some fleeting pleasure that so quickly fades away?

That there is meaning to personal relationships both now and in eternity?

That all is not lost?

That there is reason and purpose to this life?

That behind it all there stands an almighty God who guides and directs, guards and protects your life and mine according

to His holy will and loving desire to save all?

DII-18

Indeed, I do.

When I took Mary, it was so.

God kept the promise He made to all men by sending a Savior born of a virgin to set men free from their sins.

When men had no room for Him in their inn,

God provided a stable, blessed it with the presence of His holy angels, and hallowed it with the worship of humble shepherds.

When men sought to destroy the young Child's life, God led us away in safety and sent His holy angel to hover over us and shelter us from all harm.

When He came unto His own and His own received Him not, God sent wise men from a faraway country with gold, frankincense, and myrrh to provide for us.

When God moved into my life, doubt had to move out, and faith lived!

DI-19

Why, this is a miracle!

It sounds simply too good to be true.

And yet it was so!

Your doubts were overcome by fulfillment in God's promises as He supplied the power for you to believe, and as He gave you the power to live a life of faith.

You came to know the love of God in the

very test of your faith and experienced the goodness of His grace in your life.

You now have hope that gives you the clearer vision of peace with God both now and in eternity.

What must I do to rid myself of these doubts that have so long held my life in fear, anxiety, suspicion, and frustration?

DII-20

Believe! Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved (Acts 16:31) even from a life of doubt.

Believe His Word of promise!

Believe His Word of fulfillment!

I have seen and believe, but blessed are they that have not seen and yet believe.

Here doubt in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ is removed by the power of the Holy Spirit, and the miracle of the incarnation of God's Son is received in the miracle of faith.

DI-21

Then let me also pray to God that He may remove my doubts and give me this blessed faith to live by. Lord, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24)

DII-22

May it be so unto you.

DI-23

Amen!

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