

# CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

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Homiletics

Book Review

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## THE SERMON AND VISUAL AIDS

If a picture is worth a thousand words, what will happen to the usual three thousand-word, three-part sermon if visual aids really take over in the pulpit?

Why would having an apple in your hand and holding it up while you talk about it make the words you say more telling than they are without the apple? Apparently the popular picture magazines have trained the eye to be as gullible as the ear and, apparently, more insatiable. Television has made every North American a citizen of one great show-me state.

The preacher (who *would* be loved just for himself and his sermon's sake) finds it easy to discount the value of the visual aid. "It's simply because it's unusual. Who wouldn't look if the pulpit were suddenly crowded with balloons? But anything would do it. I could stand on my head and they'd all look." The argument is self-defeating — because we all know that if we stood on our heads in the pulpits they really would sit up and notice. (Now what would be a good point to illustrate by standing on my head?) The fact is that we are in the business of making God's points. A good point that goes by unnoticed is no point at all. God can't score with the audible word when the audience nods. Part of the preacher's task is to make them sit up and take notice, because taking notice is the first step in "taking heed how you hear."

There are many techniques available for gaining attention — but in this issue the homiletics section considers the visual aid. Among the sermons submitted for consideration to the staff, the champion in the number of visuals employed was "Freedom Banquet" by the Rev. W. Kassulke. It was preached from a table set before the rail at Bethel Lutheran Church, New Orleans.

To illustrate the usual fare men feed upon, the preacher used a cardboard box containing some baby toys and a ball, two Peanuts cartoon books, a stack of 45 rpm records, a toy telephone, a few dollar bills and coins, a bottle of champagne and two of beer, pin-ups, and a steak knife. A mirror served to make the problem personal. Then a large cloth covered the whole accumulated pile so that the sermon could move to its positive point.

A consistent follow-through on the value of visuals makes the conclusion reached at Resurrection Lutheran Church of Detroit, Mich., logical. It is advertised as "The Church with the Picture Window Pulpit."\* In their new church, now in its tenth year of use, a rear projection screen (6½' × 4½') is built into the wall to the preacher's left as he stands in the pulpit. On it 2 × 2 slide pictures are projected in illustration of sermon points. The controls are in the pulpit. The sermon in this issue was preached by the Rev. Anton Jehn from that pulpit after the tragic days of rioting in Detroit. The sermon is significant as a sample of the pulpit's attempt to react to contemporary crises. It is here, however, a sample of a sermon that takes visuals seriously.

What conclusion can be reached on the role of visuals? (So you don't like it! Why not?) In the "hear years" people hung on your words. In today's "see age" pictures grab them.

Is there a basic issue involved in those words? Is the sermon — the Word in words — to be designed to grab or to be grasped? Should a congregation think of itself as being worked on by the Word, or as the people

\* (The church and its "Picture Window Pulpit" were featured in the July—August issue of *Forward*, published by Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis.)

of God working with the Word? The answer is not as clear-cut as the questions would imply. Certainly the Word is to be presented in as effective a way as possible "to compel them to come in." This phrasing suggests an evangelistic sermon. But when men are *in*, the Word is offered as God's impetus to His baptized children to move them to acknowledging worship, to thankful participation in the Sacrament, and to a life of extended liturgy among men. These Christians are to involve themselves in receiving the Word. They dare not sit as if it is the preacher's task to reach them. They must reach out, to him and to the Word.

Sermons in the congregation are a mutual task for preacher and hearer.

But shall we make it hard, "that grace may abound"? Of course not. One can say, however, that the basic attitude the preacher and the hearer must have is that the Word is to be worked with for God's purpose. It is not offered merely, or even primarily, to interest and certainly not to entertain. This is minimal enough—and certainly accepted as a premise by faithful preachers and listeners.

The next step is this: if the visual aid implies that "to get the meaning" is all that should happen, it distorts the full purpose of the sermon. If it impedes the worshiping response, makes the communing of the brothers difficult, it is better eliminated.

Examine the problems suggested by those negative judgments. Visual aids are used with greatest freedom in sermons for children. Partly, that acknowledges the relaxed state of childhood, which feels no compulsion to have things done the way they always were. They *are* living and have very little awareness of *were*. The use of visual aids with children might then be an argument for getting adults to relax and benefit from them, too. But many sermons for children aim only at educating them. They are designed to teach a certain doctrine or push a special ethical act. The adult preacher then

sees the child as an object to be educated rather than a baptized member of the church who has come to worship with others in the family of God. He employs visual aids in order to make what he wants to teach more palatable and understandable. Actually he may have an even more fervent reason—he wants the children to sit still and will use any help he can get. Adults need the rest and are much more ready to sit still during the sermon. The preacher doesn't use visuals.

But surely a sermon is not chiefly concerned with conveying a fact, not the sermon set into the Sunday celebration. With children or adults, the sermon time is for bringing up the power of the Gospel to force aside a blockage of Christian being or doing and thrust the hearer forward in his believing or his living. If visuals aimed at achieving the educative goal help make the hearer convinced that learning is *all*, they are no aids at all.

There is, however, no reason why sermons must stop short of their real goal. There is no reason why visual aids should not help move the hearer-viewer to worship. The preacher must avoid using just anything, satisfied if he provides something for them to look at. The preacher can begin by defining his point and then making sure the aids aid him in that direction. He can be sure that the best, most moving aid be given to the releasing of the power of the Gospel. He can be sure that everything adds up to an incentive to worship. He can really utilize visual aids.

Finally, it should be noted that words can create something bigger than a preacher can bring through the church door, heavier than he can hold, fiercer than he can control, faster than he can juggle or throw, and more visible in the back pew than anything held head high in a pulpit. TV likes to peek at things while the voice goes on—but until people are eager for the front pews, the visual is limited. But there is nothing that

words cannot create in the very inside of a hearer's mind. Don't sell short a thousand words—nor three thousand—that make the Gospel happen.

GEORGE W. HOYER

"AND WHEN HE DREW NEAR AND SAW THE CITY, HE WEPT OVER IT."

(Luke 19:41)

(PICTURE ON THE SCREEN: *Christ Mourns Over the City* by Paul Flandrin)

The painting you see is by the French artist Paul Flandrin, completed in 1904. It is entitled *Christ Mourns Over the City* and very eloquently illustrates our text. Christ stands on Mount Olivet and looks down the avenues of time. The Jerusalem of Caiaphas lying before Him has dissolved in mist. It is a modern industrial city we see with its slums and factories. It could be Paris or London or Berlin or Detroit, any industrial city of our world. "Imagine our Lord looking down upon our city today," the artist is saying. WHY WOULD JESUS WEEP?

Why did Jesus weep as He looked down upon the city of Jerusalem centuries ago? Anyone who looked at the people then living in the city and observing them purely from an outward point of view would not have been likely to discover any special cause for weeping.

The truth is that things were going well enough for the people at this time. Many of them chafed a bit under Roman bondage, to be sure. But there was no war. They were enjoying times of relative peace. Work was to be had. One would have supposed that under such circumstances Jesus would have been happy as He looked over the city of Jerusalem. One would imagine that He would have applauded and said: "Now this is how life ought to be. See how quiet and peaceful everything is going and how well off these people are." But Jesus said nothing of the kind. When He saw the city, He wept.

He wept because He was not deceived by

surface appearances. He wept because He saw what was going on underneath in the hearts of men. Sin and evil, unbelief and godlessness and rejection of Christ, the Messiah, were bound eventually to bring upon these people the wrath and the judgment of God.

Jesus foresaw it all. He could already envision that tragic day when Rome would besiege the city and when the thousands and tens of thousands caught within its walls would die in a most pitiful way. He could see this great city with its mighty walls and its glorious temple reduced to rubble. It grieved our Savior's soul. His eyes welled over with tears, and He cried: "O Jerusalem, if only you had known!"

Well, WHAT DOES JESUS SEE as He looks down upon these United States of America and, more specifically, as He looks down upon the city of Detroit?

(PICTURE: An aerial photograph of part of Detroit)

A little more than a week ago men, looking at this great metropolitan area, would have envied us. Men in many parts of the world would have said: "Oh, if only we were blessed as they are! They are enjoying prosperity. There is work for almost anyone. Detroit has made considerable progress in race relations. It is considered a model city in this respect by some. What a blessed city! What a blessed people! How glorious it must be to be an American citizen and to enjoy all these blessings!"

But Jesus, looking down upon us, would have known otherwise. He would have seen the hatreds and passions of men rising to a boiling point, about to erupt in a rampage of arson, looting, murder, and lawlessness. He would have seen scenes such as these

(PICTURES: Four photographs of the fires and the looting)

which have filled the pages of our newspapers and the screens of our television sets.

He would have seen how in a few days' time there would be an incredible loss of property and lives, and He would have felt the suffering that would follow in its aftermath.

And now we have seen these things, too. Yet only too often we fail to recall that the violence and hatred and murder and stealing are only outward manifestations of that which is going on in the heart of man all the time. Just like a volcano, the fires are there inside all the time. Only occasionally do they spew forth the flowing, molten lava for all to see. The Bible tells us that the "imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth." It says that "out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander." (Matt. 15:19)

We are inclined to point the finger at these people who participated in the riots, (PICTURE: A pointing finger)

and we say, "They should be punished." And of course they should be punished, for their violent acts have broken the peace of the community, affected the lives of all of us, and, most terrible of all, have brought injury, death, and destruction to countless numbers of their fellowmen and destruction to property in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

We point the finger at them and are inclined to feel that we are pretty good in contrast. We forget several things. First, we forget that God does not say, "Be good in comparison to others." He says, "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matt. 5:48)

Second, we forget that every sin is great in the eyes of God since every sin is a rebellion against God. True, some sins appear greater to us because their visible and immediate effects on the lives and property of other people are greater. For example, coveting seems innocent to us when compared with murder or stealing. Yet, "You

shall not covet" is just as much a command of God as "You shall not steal" or "You shall not kill."

Third, we can forget, too, that we can be tearing up the fabric of our national morality also when we disregard our duties to God as outlined in the first three of the Ten Commandments. Despite the President's proclamation that this be "A Day of Prayer," our church attendance is not significantly higher. Church attendance in America has been steadily declining. If this decline is not stopped, then this country, so richly blessed in material things, this country, often called "Christian America," can become a heathen land. It has happened elsewhere. It can happen here. There is no doubt about it: We are neglecting the spiritual side of life. We actually seem to feel and believe that it is only the outward things of life that count and that men can really be happy if only they have an abundance of material things.

Jesus knew better, and you and I should also know better. We should know that when a people gives its heart to the worship of material things, when a people makes itself guilty of blasphemy and profanity, when there are so many who shamelessly violate God's moral laws, when there are so many who do not appreciate the infinite love of the dying Jesus, all this cannot go on without eventually bringing upon us the wrath and judgment of God. So Jesus, looking down upon us, must also weep and shed His tears of disappointment and grief for us.

As He looks down upon us, He also has something to say to us. What is our Lord saying to us in the light of the events of the past week?

The first word is: "REPENT!" This was a recurring theme in the preaching of our Lord. As Luther said in the first of his famous 95 Theses: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." By this disaster God is calling us

(PICTURE: A painting, *Repentance*, by a young artist of the congregation)

to repentance. Have we contributed to the cause of this terrible tragedy by our indifference to the plight of the poor, by our neglect of our ministry to the total man, by our failure to help solve the problems of the inner city? Let us confess our sins and turn to the Lord Jesus for forgiveness.

But our Lord does not want us to acknowledge our wrong just to prove Him right. He wants us to be His. We become His as His Spirit calls and enlightens us and leads us to daily repentance. He who gave His life for us, who rose from the dead to release His power to live, is even now with us. It is our living Lord, the Lord who wept, who draws us to Himself and gives us forgiveness and new life.

The second word is: "FORGIVE!" Even as God has forgiven us for the sake of Christ, so we must also forgive our fellowman, even

(PICTURE: Christ on the cross)

as we pray: "Forgive us our trespasses AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO TRESPASS AGAINST US." In the strength which He gives, let us follow the example of our Lord, who, when nailed to the cross, prayed: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." Who could be happy about this riot except the devil? He would like to use it to destroy the progress in race relations which we have made, to drive the Negroes and whites farther apart.

The third word is: "PRAY!" Let us pray for those guilty of rioting, looting, and killing, and for those guilty of mistreatment of any involved in the riots, asking the Lord to lead them to understand the greatness of their sin and the availability of forgiveness

(PICTURE: *Praying Hands*)

through faith in Christ. Let us pray for our city that the wounds of this catastrophe may be healed. Let us pray for the President's Commission newly formed to investigate the

causes of these riots. Let us ask God to guide them in their work to find solutions for these grave problems. Let us pray for ourselves that God would help us to be more loving, more understanding, more forgiving as we remember that we have the honor of being called His children.

The fourth word is: "HELP!" Join with your fellow citizens by responding to the

(PICTURE: The Good Samaritan)

need with your gifts of food, clothing, and money. Many are homeless. Many have lost all their possessions. Show them by your response to the calls for help that there are those who really care. And keep in mind that the help our Lord came to give can now be shared only by us who have received it. Only we can share our Lord with our city.

The fifth and final word is: "HOPE!" On June 11, 1805, the city of Detroit, only nine years old as an American city, was

(PICTURE: The Great Seal of the City of Detroit)

completely destroyed by fire with the exception of one home. The courage and hopes of the survivors were epitomized by Judge Woodward in his motto for the Great Seal of Detroit. On the left you see the Latin words: *Speramus meliora*, which means, "We hope for better things." And on the right you see the words: *Resurget cineribus*, which means, "She shall arise from her ashes." Let us then go forward and hope for better things, for God can bring good out of evil. As the apostle said: "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love Him." (Rom. 8:28)

(PICTURE: Flandrin's painting was shown again)

Our Lord looks down upon us today. Do you see Him as He weeps? Do you hear Him as He speaks?

Detroit, Mich.

ANTON JEHN