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THE TEXTUAL APPROACH TO PREACHING

The rules of homiletics do not make good sermons. Good sermons make the rules of homiletics. But what makes a good sermon? As long as that question is difficult to answer, contemporary theological experts and students who expect the imminent demise of all departments of practical theology will tune their flutes and practice their wailing uselessly. Homiletics has a future—and a present—in that question. But more than that: psychology, pastoral theology, anthropology and drama all have a part in the task of homiletics. That is true because a good sermon is controlled in equal parts by what the preacher makes up and by what makes up his audience.

Both of these elements make the following sermon by Dr. Martin Scharlemann of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, an interesting study, in addition to its being a good sermon.

Analyze it, for instance from the points of view of some of the historic fundamental divisions of sermon types. It certainly has a text; is it then textual? Or is it expository? The amount of text that a printer prints or a preacher reads at the head of his sermon is a matter of style more than a reflection of method. It is certainly textual in that it works with the words quoted and their context. But it is certainly larger than textual in a narrow sense, for it draws on the whole scope of Biblical revelation. In that sense it is expository, although its exposition ranges through much more Biblical material than an expository sermon developing a sequential number of verses would do. It obviously makes no attempt to develop in sequence the verses of the incident of which it is a part. Its inclusion of a major division paralleling the times of the Old Testament with those of the Reformation era, and adding as a third

aspect a line drawn through our own times, makes it clearly representative also of topical preaching.

Is it exegetical? Yes. Is it systematic? Yes. It takes a New Testament quotation of an Old Testament prophet, clarifies its Old Testament meaning, and then shows its New Testament use. But then it proceeds to place its meaning into the frame of Reformation times and finally applies it to our own time. Is it textual, topical, exegetical, and systematic? Yes.

The sermon is interesting as well for what an analysis may yield as to its approach to the audience. (The disparity in the audience considering these comments itself precludes any unanimous conclusion as to best or second best.) Try this test, and try it if you will with one of your own sermons: When is the first reference made to *us*? "Us" is the fifth word in this sermon, but the first real reference to *us* is much later. The author works over the text, the New Testament setting of the text, the Old Testament source of the text, the whole Old Testament history, bringing it back through the intertestamental period to the time of the quotation in Acts. Then we get in—in the 12th paragraph—but only for four sentences' worth. Then we are back at the Reformation, then in the New and Old Testament periods. We are there, not in terms of our individual concerns but as Christians interested in Scripture and the church as subjects of our concern. By the 17th paragraph our appreciation of the pertinence of all this for our own lives in the present time is noted. And from then on the real point of the sermon is developed, connecting what has gone before with us and to our time and life in the church.

Do your sermons parallel this approach? Those who develop textual sermons insist that a preacher should preach his text. It is

argued by some that if we are preaching to people, then people and their pertinent personal problems are what we should preach about, using Biblical material as source for comparison, clarification, and the application of Law and Gospel. If the sermon is for people, then it should not merely begin in the pew or end in the pew but be about the pew. Others would retort that the golden days of preaching existed when the clergy began, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost," expounded the text's meaning, said "Amen," and sat down. What brought about the decline of the pulpit was "relevance."

What makes a good sermon?

GEORGE W. HOYER

WHEN GOD ACTS

(This sermon was preached at Redeemer Lutheran Church, St. Paul, Minn., Nov. 1, 1964.)

Acts 13:41: "See this, you scoffers, wonder and begone; for I am doing a deed in your days, a deed which you will never believe when you are told of it."

The Reformation has taught us the lesson that every Biblical statement has both a past and a future because it is woven into the very fabric of God's dealings with His people. Tonight's text therefore also points in two directions: back to what God once did and forward to what He will still do. The very fact that Paul chose to quote from an Old Testament prophet reveals the abiding thrust of a word from the Lord. It does not die; it cannot be broken; it moves forward along the line of God's redemptive intent.

Acts 13 records the first address of Saul of Tarsus, soon to be known as Paul the apostle. He spoke of all that had taken place in Jerusalem, especially of the crucifixion and the resurrection of one known as Jesus. These events had occurred in terms of fulfillment, of liberation, of reconciliation, and of forgiveness. God had acted decisively among

His people; a new age had begun. The promised Messiah was even now at work among men in the very proclamation of the witnesses to His resurrection. In the Holy City men had scoffed in unbelief. How could life spring from death—and that the death of one hanged on a tree! "Beware," warned the apostle; "look out, lest the words of the prophet Habakkuk apply to you here in Antioch of Pisidia; for if they do, you will surely perish."

God had acted; of this Paul was sure. But what He had done had not met the expectations of Israel. Would not God exalt His people in the last days? Had He not chosen them to be His very own? Had not they alone among all the nations of the earth accepted His Law? Would not the Messiah dethrone Caesar? These very dreams prevented Jerusalem from seeing and believing what God had accomplished in the death and resurrection of David's great Son. They could see no connection between the promises once given to the fathers and the career of the Prophet from Nazareth. For when God acts, He does so in His own way. He is always God. Sin being what it is, only death—the death of God's Righteous One—could make it good. But Jerusalem did not understand. It did not recall the observation of one of its own prophets—a word which became one of the watchwords of the Reformation—that the divine will "kills and makes alive, it brings down to hell and brings back again" (1 Sam. 2:6). Paul's audience might not believe this. Therefore the apostle chose to conclude with a statement from one of God's own prophets to confront his hearers directly with the issue of their need for faith.

Habakkuk too had found God's ways puzzling and mysterious. Had not Israel been created to serve God? Had not Jehovah manifested Himself to this people in a series of mighty acts as a God of power and of mercy? Yet the greater part of Israel had been carried off into an exile from which they

would not return. Only two tribes remained in the land of promise. But even among them the "law was slacked," as the prophet saw. What would God do about the oppression and injustice that prevailed in Judah? The Lord had in fact already begun to act. The Chaldeans had won a great battle over the Egyptians at Carchemish (605 B. C.). They had been made strong to serve as God's instrument of judgment on Judah. This foreign nation now began to exploit and to tyrannize over God's own. Would Jehovah, the God of justice, permit this? How, in the name of all that God had revealed of Himself, could rulers such as these serve as instruments for good? How indeed?

There you have the prophet's "Why?" to God's action. How could life spring from this kind of social and political death? The prophet was assured that the righteous was to live—by faith! The days were evil, to be sure; but it was a time for faithfulness and full confidence in the very presence of this great riddle of God's ways with His people. Chaldea too must perish. Evil carried within it the seed of its own ruin. But years might pass under the heel of the oppressor. "Though the vision tarry, wait for it," said Habakkuk. Such waiting, waiting upon God, *that* was to be the source of real life. That took faith. But the just would live by faith—even when Judah went into exile a few years later.

In Babylon Judah learned to fall back on trusting her own Lord. She spurned the gods of her conquerors and sang the honors of Jehovah as "the great King above all gods." Splendor and power stood on the side of Babylon. All this, however, as the prophet saw, was like the flower of the field. The Word of the Lord would outlast all such pomp and circumstance; and that Word was to be found in Judah. In due time God would again make known His rule.

Soon Cyrus of Persia rose to challenge the power of Babylon. Here God was at work

again, shaping history to arrange for the return of His people to their land, their temple. Out of the death of exile there would flow the life of reconstruction. The nations might not understand. They might even scoff at the tiny remnant returning to Jerusalem. Many of the returning exiles themselves might be disillusioned as they compared the edifice they were erecting with the splendor of Solomon's ancient temple. Many began to feel that the age of God's great Anointed had come; but then Zerubabel was not to be the Messiah after all! Life returned to its dismal routine of "everydayness." There was left only the memory of God's promises to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob, to David, and to the prophets. The Jews also recalled the story of His great deeds. Surely He would act again—decisively!—to confound the scoffers. But possibly God would do so only in the "last days."

Several centuries passed. Alexander routed the Persians and set out to conquer the world. At his death his empire fell apart. Jerusalem paid tribute first to Egypt then to the Syrians. The "sons of the Hammer," the Macabees, drove out the oppressors. But worldliness remained. The worship at the temple seemed to become more defiled and corrupt as the years passed. The Lord's anointed high priest stooped to debase his sacred office, ruling as a king or conniving with foreigners for political advantage and power. Something new must happen.

Some chose to move out into the desert of Judah, applying to themselves the words of Isaiah, "In the desert prepare a highway for your God." They read that Habakkuk had spoken of God acting to confound His despisers. The last days must be at hand. Jehovah was about to gather His people from the "desert of the nations." Then the great battle against Belial would begin. Today we refer to this group as the Dead Sea community. Its members were utterly wrong.

Salvation was not to come in their way at all. The Roman legions destroyed their buildings and their society on their way as they faced the task of razing the rebellious city to the ground.

God's great act was to take place in Jerusalem and not at Qumran. That city chose to nail the Righteous One to a cross, thereby bringing judgment upon itself but at the same time creating the events of salvation. Saul had gone out from there to put an end to those who proclaimed this act of God but was himself brought to life. Christians in Syrian Antioch sent him and Barnabas out to bring the Good News to others. Paul never stopped again until he was put in chains and later beheaded.

The members of his race and tribe might scoff at God's ways, but the Lord was not one to be despised. A new Israel was being gathered, not in the desert of Judah but in the churches founded in the cities of the Roman empire. Here is how God had chosen to act to redeem men, to provide an open future in the story of His church reaching out to win the world.

Now God has come to us in Word and Sacrament. He acts and speaks to forgive us. The righteous by faith shall live. Despite it not, this way of His. The Roman Church once did. Leo X was sure that he had only a "monkish quarrel" on his hands. He was "enjoying" the papacy, hardly aware that, unless God were soon to act again, the church ruled from Rome would fall prey to its own moral corruption and spiritual blight. In the barbarous North God had chosen to raise up His instrument of re-creation and reformation. An Augustinian monk had discovered the secret of Habakkuk and of Paul: "The just shall live by faith."

Martin Luther found liberation where none was expected. He was preparing a course of lectures for the fall term of 1513 on the first section of the Psalter. All went well until he came to the last unit, Psalm 31

according to our numbering. There he read in verse 1: "In Thy justice deliver me." This made no sense to him. "Justice," as he had learned to know the term, was a word that rattled its chains; it tyrannized over people. It stood for what God demanded by way of right behavior. How could the psalmist pray for liberation through justice? This seemed utterly incomprehensible and self-contradictory.

For you see the church had turned the Gospel into a new law. This process had begun almost at once after the close of the apostolic age. As the decades and centuries rolled by, the burden of this new law grew heavier and heavier. The voice of the apostle ceased to be heard for what he had gone out to proclaim. Paul had insisted that God did not raise Jesus from the dead in order to weigh men down by the demands of a new law, but to liberate them from every kind of law as a way of salvation. The Father had raised His Son from the dead to manifest justice, to be sure, but this was to be understood as a gift: a righteousness that comes from faith. But Luther had not yet discovered this great mystery. And so, as he tells us, he beat upon the Scriptures to see whether they would not yield up their secret.

They did—in God's own way! Luther recalled that Paul had used the word "justice" in the first chapter of Romans. He consulted this section to see whether it might throw light on the words from the psalm. He read that God had manifested His righteousness in the Gospel. "If only God had not made known His Gospel," Luther thought to himself. "Then men would not need to live with the terror of His holiness!" At first he failed utterly to get any help from Romans. On the contrary, he was almost driven to despair. Then he noted that the works of God were actually deeds He had done for us and our salvation. It occurred to him that God's righteousness might be God Himself offering men His own righteousness and

vindicating His own. Possibly this is what the apostle understood as "Gospel," as "Good News." Luther investigated a little more closely and concluded that he had hit upon the solution for the verse in the psalm. This was liberation indeed! "In Thy justice, in Thy righteousness, deliver me." Why, of course, that made sense. Then it was, as Luther puts it, that the gates of paradise were opened to him.

God had acted once more. Luther became the instrument of His power and His grace to set before men the mercies of God in Jesus Christ. It was a strange way of getting with the task of cleansing the church. But, after all, Wittenberg was hardly more obscure than ancient Nazareth, which is nowhere mentioned in rabbinic literature. As St. Paul reminds us, God takes things that are of no consequence to make them great. He creates out of nothing. He brings life out of death. When God acts we are to be surprised and wonder.

But will He ever act again? Habakkuk of old was fully aware of what God had done; but would He act again? That was the test of faith: Were the promises of God to hold in a future full of foreboding? We can appreciate his point today. Our age is one to strike terror into men's hearts. Everywhere God's people are beset by those who ignore and even blaspheme His name. Church life is threatened from within by the raw forces of a blatantly secular life and stands in danger of being overwhelmed and destroyed by a world conspiracy determined to pervert all that is right and true.

We may well ask, as I am sure we all have, "Why, Lord, all this?" Why oppression? Why the ominous threat of total extinction? Why is "truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne?" While we have a right to ask these questions, ours is also the responsibility to listen closely to that word which became the motif of the Reformation and still lingers among us as a sentence of

promise and of power: "He that is righteous by faith shall live."

On all sides we are reminded of the church's halting imperfections. But the ascended Lord is her head. He alone is her strength, and her work, like that of His earthly ministry, must go on in lowliness and meekness. She is learning once again what it means that God's power is made known in weakness. We may be quite sure that He has not forgotten His people. For—

Though the cause of evil prosper,
 Yet 'tis Truth alone that's strong.
 Truth forever on the scaffold,
 Wrong forever on the throne;
 Yet that scaffold sways the future,
 And, behind the dim unknown,
 Standeth God within the shadow,
 Keeping watch above His own.

He will act again, but in His own way and at His appointed time. He has bound Himself to His own promises, but always reserves for Himself the manner of fulfillment, as Habakkuk knew and Paul the apostle had discovered. Throughout the church men are persuaded that the time has come for God to act anew, to reach in with the power of His grace, doing this after sweeping away our programs, our campaigns, our organizations, and our institutions. It is out of death that He creates life. God must utterly destroy, if there is to be another and greater chapter in His dealings with us. And he that is righteous by faith shall live.

Something of the pattern of future church life shines through at various places today. It is a picture of Christian men and women losing their lives in service to others and thereby finding life, aware that the church does not exist to save itself but to give its life for others in imitation of her Lord. Two vignettes come to mind in particular at the moment. One is Falerna in Calabria, Italy, where an "ecumenical team" is at work redeeming a community that hitherto had been passed by on the other side by both the Le-

vite of social improvement and the priest of religious concern. The other is known simply as "the Plan for the South," a massive assault by 32 Christian leaders from four European nations on the superstition, filth, ignorance, and illiteracy of Riesi, Sicily. They have gone there on the conviction that the method of God's kingdom is the cross.

The way of the cross — no doubt that is the way our Lord is leading us! Perhaps it will take a nuclear holocaust to sweep away all that is not essential. Possibly that will be His way of healing the church, divided as she is and with each part jealous of its own prestige and influence. When God acts in this way, He may arrange for us to lose our identity and even our names as denominations. That will be His way of saying, "But what's in a name except that name which is

above every name, at which every knee shall bow of things in heaven, on earth, and under the earth?" When God acts we ourselves (not to mention the scoffer!) will hardly believe when we are told of it. But despise it not. God often provides surprises for His children. This we have learned from the story of the days of the church's reformation.

When the moment comes for God to act again, the Lutheran Church will be ready. With her Bible, her sacraments, her catechism, her hymnal, and her works of mercy she will go wherever men gather in order to offer them the Word even if — or would we say especially when? — we must live once more in caves. If the church has a future, this is the way.

MARTIN H. SCHARLEMANN