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ARCHIVES

“Preaching from Isaiah”

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*P*reaching from Isaiah, the book by Professor John P. Milton of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minn., was published by Augsburg Publishing House of Minneapolis in 1953 and was reviewed by the present writer in the CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY in the May issue of 1954 (pp. 407 f.). The purpose of this extended study is to stress the underlying principle of the work regarding the choice of sermon texts for the Sunday morning service, a principle which renders this book especially noteworthy and which is valid for many other areas of the Scriptures as a source for preaching texts.

I

The primary purpose of the book is not to provide an exegesis of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. Professor Milton is a careful Biblical scholar, and each of his textual studies contains the divisions “Basic religious teachings of the text” and “New Testament echoes of the text.” It is this phase of the book which makes it a splendid summary of this “Gospel according to the Old Testament.” An introduction by the author is entitled “The Historical Milieu of the Book of Isaiah.” In this introduction the author gives a clue to his method: to discern the “times-coloring” of the prophecy “as that of an event within the historical horizon of the prophet and of his people,” to see that the prophecy “may indeed find a partial fulfilment in that event,” and to discover “in the prophetic message spiritual depths and sometimes specific predictions that point beyond it to the ultimate goal of God’s covenant” (p. 2). The author discerns two such “times-colorings” in the Book, that of the covenant with Abraham and with his seed as pervading the entire book, and redemption from Babylon forecasting the ultimate redemption in the latter part of the book.

Professor Milton gives dates for the preparation of Isaiah as far as this is possible. He points out that chapters 40—66, if they are from the Isaiah of the 8th century, are “pure prediction, with a message of redemption to a people not yet in captivity and therefore not yet in need of the message” (p. 5). The other possibility is that they are from a later anonymous prophet of the 6th century. The author says, “There is something to be said on both sides of this question of authorship.” He stresses that also in the latter case the prophecy fits more

than the redemption from Babylon alone and points forward to the age of the redemption of Christ and the final consummation of His return.

This problem of finding in historical events the forecasts of New Testament redemption and salvation pervades a number of the texts. Missouri Synod exegetes have tended to minimize the earlier historical event and to accentuate the ultimate New Testament target. It is noteworthy that Professor Milton nowhere reduces the latter accent. This is particularly true in his sketching of New Testament quotations and "echoes."

II

The chief purpose of reviewing Professor Milton's book at this time is to draw attention to its principles of preaching in the morning service. The average pastor feels more at home in the New Testament than the Old. Where he follows the pattern of the church year and the accents for the Sunday set up by the traditional Epistles and Gospels, he finds himself preaching the New Testament texts to a preponderant degree. He finds many systems of pericopic selections based on the New Testament which tend to confirm his predilection. Professor Milton's purpose is to set up a system of preaching texts which conform to the church year and which are drawn from the Old Testament. There are other such systems, of course. Paul Nesper's *Biblical Texts* (1952, Columbus: The Wartburg Press) offers 10 such systems: The series published by the Commission on a Common Liturgy, Nitsch, Saxon, Thomasius, Hannover, Swedish, Eisenach, Synodical Conference (published in the Concordia Publishing House diary), Ranke and Soll. Professor Milton takes one book—a large one and mightily evangelical withal—as the source of his texts.

What makes the author's approach significant is that he does not simply attach the idea of his text to a thought taken from the Epistle or Gospel for the day. But he seeks to relate the text to the total theme of the day. Many a preacher makes the mistake of correlating a preaching text with Epistle or Gospel and then neglecting the contributions of the other ingredients of the morning Common Service—Introit, Gradual, Collect. Or he attaches the text so closely to either Epistle or Gospel that it seems to be totally out of phase with the other. The author's method of aiming at a synthesis is simply to attach, in general, to the topic for the day as set up in the lectionary of the Augustana hymnal. New Testament texts from the Swedish lectionary are the current subjects of homiletical helps in this journal.

The method of constructing a unity of theme for a given day of the church year is not simply to construct a mosaic or synthesis of all of

the liturgical elements for the day. Rather should it be to discern an over-all goal for the hearer to which all make a contribution—some by expressing the goal itself, some by pointing out hindrances and difficulties, some by setting forth the aid of God in Christ and the Spirit to the end of achieving the goal, some by voicing the prayer and praise of the congregation to the end of the goal for the day. One value, discernible in many of the texts in this book, is that they include the cues for fact and message as well as for prayer and praise.

It should finally be pointed out that Professor Milton is not averse to the idea of preaching Isaiah through in an "expository" or consecutive method, but he feels that this would be appropriate in the Lutheran communion chiefly in evening services. His book does contain, however, suggestions for free texts gathered under twenty-five topics and finally a list of 52 "Great Texts in the Book of Isaiah." Every liturgical taste and tradition is thus served.

III

Christmas is already rich in idioms from Isaiah. Interesting is the choice of 25:6-9 for Easter, as a parallel to 1 Cor. 15:54. For Easter Monday the theme of witness in 43:10-13 is suggested. Good Friday obviously receives 53:10-12, and the "New Testament echoes" are especially interesting. Ascension receives 52:13-15 around the theme of the exaltation of the Servant; another suggestion is 33:17-24, "The king in his beauty!"

By way of a special sampling, let us review the Sundays in May, 1955. This will give opportunity to note both appropriateness and the special pitfall of pericopic preaching, variety from day to day.

Jubilate (3 a. Easter). Introit: praise, acknowledgment of the power of God. Collect: prayer for those who have erred. Epistle: glorifying God in the midst of ungodly people. Gospel: Christ's promise of joy for sorrow through His redemption. Gradual: Christ's redemptive work sealed by His resurrection. Unifying thought: power amid trial and unbelief; Milton: "Homeward Bound!" Text: 30:18-21, "The bread of adversity and the water of affliction." "The experience of the earthly Israel becomes a prophecy of the experience of the children of God"; but then God's people must walk in His way. The accent on the Gospel preached to the problem of affliction produces splendid variation in this sequence. An interesting note in "Basic religious teachings of the text": "A right prayer is not demanding but pleading; it presents its needs to God and then trustingly waits for Him."

Cantate. Introit: sing, because of accomplished salvation from God. Collect: general prayer to desire what God's will is and to achieve His joys. Epistle: God's gift of the new heart through the Word. Gospel: the gift of the Comforter. Gradual: exaltation of the risen Christ. Unifying thought: Milton discards the Swedish suggestion for "Sanctification in the Truth"; 65:13-16: "The God of truth." The concepts of truth and of rejoicing circulate through the readings and text. This truth is the faithfulness of God, achieved in its fullness in Christ, the Truth.

Rogate. Introit: praise because of the completed redemption (echoed in the Gradual). Collect: general petition for right thought and deed. Epistle: doers as well as hearers of the Word. Gospel: prayer to the Father in the name of Jesus. Milton chooses the conventional unit thought of prayer; text: Is. 56:6-8, "My house of prayer." Milton feels that this text offers a suitable preparation for Pentecost in its stress on "all nations." This text was quoted by the Savior at the cleansing of the Temple. Milton points out the stress of joy in prayerful worship.

Exaudi. Introit: seek the Lord. Collect: to serve the Lord with a pure heart. Epistle: witness through the power of God. Gospel: the Comforter will sustain under trial. The Gradual echoes the Gospel. The Lectionary alludes to the waiting for Pentecost of the first disciples, "Waiting for the Promise of the Father." Text: 32:12-20, "Until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high." Milton's discussion of this text notes the long-term and spiritual prophecy growing out of the immediate promise to Jerusalem. Interesting is the accent on righteousness preceding peace; Rom. 14:17 is alluded to.

Whitsunday. Introit: rejoicing in God. Collect: for the Pentecost Spirit. Epistle: the Pentecost story. Gospel: promise of the Comforter and His peace. Gradual: prayer for the Spirit. Unit thought: "The Gift of the Holy Spirit." Text: 44:1-8, "I will pour my Spirit upon your descendants." Again intermediate experiences before Pentecost seem latent in this prophecy; but the goal in the ultimate New Testament outpouring, Milton points out, is quite parallel to the Joel 2:28,29 prophecy. Spirit and blessing are equated. Designations for God with Messianic intent in this text are Redeemer, First and Last, Rock.

This survey of suggestions, reflecting a dozen packed pages in Milton's book, hints slightly at the wealth of variety introduced into the preaching for the day through the use of Isaiah. The richness of imagery, the many bonds with the New Testament, if not by direct

quotation, at least in allusions and motifs, make these texts most attractive to the thoughtful preacher.

The present writer suggests that several months of careful study should precede the determination to utilize Professor Milton's selections for a year or a half-year of preaching. His book suggests a great deal of helpful conceptual study; additional use of lexicon and commentary will be needed at times. Many a pastor will find it necessary to step up the understanding of the Old Testament covenant, the manner in which God used the prophets, and the contribution of the Old Testament to the New. Out of it all should come glowing preaching on the glory of the New Testament age, the riches of God's mercy toward His own people, and the faithfulness of His redemptive purpose. Parallel studies in Bible classes will be useful. This course of preaching should simultaneously enrich preaching in general and the worship of each day of the church year in particular.

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(Special study outlines for the use of pastoral conferences are obtainable from the Managing Editor, CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY, 801 De Mun Ave., St. Louis 5, Mo. Professor Milton's book may be ordered from Concordia Publishing House, 3558 S. Jefferson Ave., St. Louis 18, Mo., at \$2.50.)