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Theological Accents In Lenten Preaching

HENRY J. EGGOLD
Professor of Homiletics (1951-)

THERE IS A GREAT DANGER in preaching on the Lenten story that the hearers merely look at the story and not through it. There is a way of telling the story so that a person can hear it with as much detachment as he does an Alfred Hitchcock movie. His emotions rise when he hears about the treachery of the chief priests and scribes. He is disappointed in the disciples; they should have been made of sterner stuff. But that's the way friends often are. And then there is Jesus, a man of high ideals who, like Abraham Lincoln, endures the scorn of some in his generation, only to belong to the ages in the hearts of future generations.

Superficial emotions like these are aroused when sermons are entirely a homily style recital of the events as they occurred. People come away with the idea that they have witnessed seven acts in a play but have failed to see through the drama either into their own hearts or into the heart of God.

This danger lurks close at hand particularly when we preach on the characters, like Judas, the disciple turned traitor; Peter, the boaster; Caiaphas, the religious formalist; Pilate, the cowardly judge; Herod the seeker after novelties; etc. Each Wednesday evening finds God's people sitting enraptured by the story, but really not involved in it themselves. Indeed, they can come away from sermons like that thanking God that they are not as other men are.

Our task in preaching is more than to look at the story of the passion, as careful for detail as we ought to be. It is to see through the story. When we do, we see ourselves for who we really are, beggars before God; and we see God for who He is, the just God who punishes sin and at the same time the God of mercy and grace. In short, Lenten preaching puts into sharp focus and contrast the two doctrines, the Law and the Gospel. Here we see both God's strange work by which He kills, and His proper work by which he makes alive.

The Law that kills and damns is preached powerfully in the drama of the cross. Throughout this mighty drama we are confronted with the Law. The chief priests are those who according to the Law are without excuse. They had light enough to believe that Christ was the Messiah; yet they in their darkness comprehended it not. Here you have a dramatic picture of man by nature who cannot see at noonday because he is spiritually blind. Here you have a picture of those in our culture who worship at the altars of the gods of hedonism, scientism, and humanism and deny the Lord that bought them and bring upon themselves swift destruction. The mother sin of all is the rejection of Christ as Lord. To reject Christ is to commit spiritual

suicide. This message certainly needs to be preached to help marginal members and avowed unbelievers see themselves.

And then there are the disciples, great men, believers like ourselves, but weak as we. Judas shows us the capacity within each of us to betray our Lord and to be plunged into the awful night of despair. Then there is Peter who when he opened his mouth usually said the wrong thing, boasting when he should have been quiet, denying when he should have been confessing. Then there are also the other disciples who forsook Him and fled.

To help Christians see themselves in the disciples is the task of the preacher. Our failure to be what we profess to be and ought to be makes us sinners. How often by our inconsistencies we deny the Lord that bought us.

At this stage we can imagine that our hearers, like ourselves, are raising their defenses against the indictment of the Law. One argues, "Nobody's perfect." And this can be sweet solace to the guilty conscience. But majority rule never decided things in the Kingdom. Another argues that he has much good on his record, as though this affects or compensates for the evil. This man looks at the Law as an ideal, not as a command. Someone has said that failure to achieve conduct corresponding to the ideal may produce modest in place of immodest boasting, but it need not give us a sense of sin at all.

But all defenses are swept away when we see the stark reality of the cross itself. There we see the awful, fearful wrath of God. The cross tells us that God is not satisfied with good intentions, weak attempts at piety, or being good enough to thank God that we are not as other men are. In the cross we see the fury of the wrath of the just God meted out to His Son whom He sent to be the bearer of the guilt and punishment of the world's sin. "If these things be done in the green tree, what shall be done in the dry?" Before the cross we stand naked, bankrupt, corrupted by sin, deserving only damnation in hell for our monstrous truancy. Perhaps this is what Kierkegaard meant when he said that the preaching of the Gospel is the preaching of original sin.

At this point in our preaching of the Law we stand at a critical juncture. What we say now is crucially important. For example, if you should say something to this effect, "You are bad. Now, for goodness' sake, be good," you are asking your hearer to do what he has been failing at. You are trying to use the Law to produce piety. You are, in effect, plunging your troubled sinner deeper into despair.

Again, you might be tempted to say, "You are indeed a miserable sinner, but your plight is not so bad because Christ died for you." On the face of it, that might sound good. However, we have to guard against preaching what Bonhoeffer calls cheap grace, grace that costs nothing. You can easily lead the hearer to argue as one man did of whom Luther tells. He said: "I'm living in sin up to my ears, but I'm not worried because Christ died for me."

We are not to take the edge off the Law either by mitigating the seriousness of sin nor by mixing Law and Gospel. When the sinner

says: "What shall I do?" the answer is, "Repent." This involves a frank confession of sin to God and the neighbor. It is following the prodigal son who said: "I am going back to my father, and I will say, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.'" O. Hobart Mowrer said something significant for us when he remarked that a person cannot find peace until he has confessed his sin to the significant others.

To the sinner conscious of his sin, fearful before the wrath of God, there is no comfort apart from the Gospel. That is why it is monstrous truancy in the pulpit to withhold the Gospel from the sinner. The danger to do that is very real. Most of us have no trouble preaching the law, but we have more difficulty verbalizing the Gospel in its full-orbed beauty. We have less difficulty preaching in the imperative mood than we do preaching in the indicative. If doctors treated preachers the way some preachers treat congregations, we wouldn't like that very well. We want our doctors to be thorough in their diagnosis, but what we cry out for in our pain is relief.

That relief comes in the Gospel of God's grace in Christ. The Gospel ought to be central in our preaching. That is why every text ought to be treated from the vantage point of the Gospel. In sermonizing, it is a good practice first to find out where the Gospel is and then to build the rest of the sermon around the Gospel idea. That will prevent the Gospel from coming in as an afterthought, and it will let the Gospel come through.

And we have to preach the Gospel loud and clear, and in every sermon, because it is so hard to believe. Paul calls it a mystery. He says that it is a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks. The difficulty is illustrated by the man who stood in the narthex of a great cathedral, wringing his hat in his hands as he listened to the choir singing the *Agnus Dei* and muttering, "O God, if it were only so."

But it is so, and the Lenten season preaches it best of all. But one of the dangers we face is preaching the Gospel in the same way, so that at last we become discouraged with ourselves for saying the same thing in the same way each time we preach. The reading of a book like Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching Of the Cross* (Eerdmans, 1955) can be helpful.

But the Lenten story itself offers some clues for variety. The variety lies in the use of the metaphors which describe the significance of our Lord's passion. One picture is that of expiation of sin through sacrifice (Psalm 51; 1 John 1:7; Isaiah 1:18). This picture takes us back to the great day of atonement. On that day the priest offered a bullock for the sins of the priesthood. He then offered one goat. The goat was killed as a substitute for the people, the innocent for the guilty. The sacrifice was for expiation, symbolized by the second goat driven out into the wilderness laden with the sins of the people. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that Christ was both the victim and the priest (Hebrews 9). Moreover our sin is now atoned for,

through Christ our substitute, now to be remembered against us no more.

Another picture is that of ransom (Matt. 20:28; 1 Tim. 2:16; 1 Peter 1:18-19; 1 Cor. 6:20). The picture here is that of humanity enslaved under the tyranny of sin, death, and the devil. Christ pays the ransom price to redeem us. Now there is liberty for the captive and the opening of the prison to those that are bound.

Another picture is that of the *Christus Victor*, the mighty conqueror who does battle against the powers of darkness to defeat the enemies: sin, death, and devil. Now the kingdom of darkness lies in shambles, and the true King reigns in His messianic kingdom of grace (Rom. 8:3-4; 1 Cor. 15; Col. 2:15).

Another idea is that of reconciliation or restoration to fellowship (Rom. 5:10; 2 Cor. 5:19). Man through sin broke the fellowship with God; hence he is in a condition of death. Christ restored mankind to fellowship with God. Here we ought to guard against a distortion, that of so presenting the idea of reconciliation as though God hated the world and then Christ turned blind hatred into love by His substitutionary death. Paul declares: "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). In reconciliation God is the prime mover, and His motive is love. The enmity is in the world estranged from God. But God stooped to conquer the world by sending into the world the Prince of Peace, His only Son. Christ made peace by taking the handwriting of ordinances which was contrary to us and nailing it to His cross (Col. 2:14).

Another idea is that of the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. God manifests His love for the world of sinners by sending His own Son to be the sin bearer. Jesus in obedience to His Father's will takes upon Him the form of a servant, is made in the likeness of man, and being found in fashion as a man becomes obedient unto death, even the death of the cross (Phil. 2:7-8). Jesus Himself most frequently speaks of His act of love as one of obedience to His Father. He lives to glorify His Father through His obedience. "Not my will, but thine be done," His Gethsemane petition, represents His suffering and death as an act of obedience.

Another picture is that of justification. This is a judicial picture. By sin the world stands guilty before the judgment seat of God. The verdict man deserves on account of sin is death.

But God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us. Christ assumed both mankind's guilt and punishment. For the sake of Christ's complete satisfaction God "justifies the ungodly" (Rom. 4:5). "By the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life" (Romans 5:18). Christ was raised again for our justification (Rom. 4:25).

Just as on January 1, 1863, Lincoln declared all slaves free, so in the resurrection of Christ God declared the world justified. Faith accepts this gift and lives in the peace of forgiveness. Romans 4:5: "To him that worketh not but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness."

In Lent and always it is infinitely more important to preach faith into people's hearts by telling the story of the Gospel than to plead with people to accept the Gospel.

A final picture is that of the covenant. The picture takes us back to the covenant God made with Abraham, the father of the faithful (Genesis 12:2-3). This covenant reveals God's grace, for it was sheer grace that prompted God to establish Israel as His people. Moreover, the covenant reveals also God's faithfulness. The very covenant established by God's mercy called for Israel to manifest mercy. But Israel broke the covenant by failing to live up to its demands (cfr. Amos and Hosea). But God remained faithful to His covenant.

He established the new covenant through His Son. "Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). The coming of Christ attested both God's grace for sinners and His faithfulness to His covenant (Luke 1:72).

Jesus Christ Himself is the mediator of the new covenant (Hebrews 8:6; 9:15). His blood shed is the manifestation and the guarantee both of God's grace and of His faithfulness.

This is the Gospel which it is our joyous privilege to preach each Lenten season. What a message! Nothing more revolutionary has ever happened in the history of man than the suffering and death and resurrection of our Lord. When this Gospel is preached, hardened centurions confess: "Surely this was a righteous man and the Son of God." Hardened criminals see His love and pray: "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy Kingdom." Souls burdened by their denials see the Christ of the Cross and find there the courage to confess Christ even in the face of persecution. This is the Gospel which we preach to the joy and edifying of God's holy people.