

Rediscovering Lost Treasure: Forgotten Preaching Texts of the Old Testament

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There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
And found and lost again and again.

-T.S. Eliot

What happens when the preacher hits those inevitable dry times? Familiar lectionary texts do not stimulate. Old themes do not inspire. The tried and true rings hollow and empty. Then it may be time to turn to biblical narratives, poetry or prophecies which we may never have studied or preached on before. The preacher may initially resist going into such uncharted territory. But the extra effort can help to sweep away old cobwebs and fire up the homiletical engine once more.

This article seeks to explore the values of unfamiliar Old Testament texts as resources for parish preaching. Many important Old Testament texts remain largely untouched by parish pastors. These lost treasures need to be found again by the Church. Our study will begin with some of the reasons why so many good Old Testament treasures have been lost. We will then consider some of the Old Testament treasures which deserve to be rediscovered. Finally, we will outline practical strategies for recovering valuable Old Testament texts which have lain fallow and undisturbed in the biblical canon.

Why Have the Treasures Been Lost?

As I have talked with pastors, they have confessed that they often avoid certain Old Testament texts for several reasons. Many pastors do not know the history and background of the Old Testament as well as they know the background of the New Testament. The Old Testament was written over at least a thousand-year period without a complex swirl of ancient Near Eastern events and personages. Moreover, some preachers perceive much of the Old Testament to be either useless or even repugnant to the modern Christian. The Old Testament's fascination with genealogies, purity and dietary laws, detailed measurement of the Jerusalem Temple, ritual practices and animal and grain sacrifices simply do not strike an immediately responsive chord in the contemporary mind. Preachers are repelled by Old Testament images of God as angry judge or divine warrior. Some charge the Old Testament with promoting unedifying qualities like this call for revenge leveled against the Babylonians who have destroyed Jerusalem and exiled the Israelites in Psalm 137:9:

Happy shall he be who takes your little ones

and dashes them against the rock!

This text, like many others deemed “unworthy,” is typically censored by most lectionary committees.

What is at stake, of course, is the heretical danger which has always couched at the door of the Christian Church ever since the days of Marcion of Rome in the second century A.D. Marcion believed that the God of the Old Testament was different and inferior in kind and quality from the God of Jesus Christ revealed in the New. By not hearing Old Testament texts preached with some frequency, congregations become practical “Marcionites.” The implicit lesson is that the Old Testament is somehow inferior or less authoritative than the New.

Perhaps the most important practical reason for the neglect of this part of the canon stems from the design of current church lectionaries. Because lectionaries are modeled after the church year and the life of Christ, they typically favor full and consecutive readings of the Gospels and Epistles. In contrast, Old Testament texts are chosen haphazardly depending on apparent links with the theme of the Gospel for that Sunday.¹ The practical result is that most lectionaries use readings from a quite limited body of Old Testament material. And even when Old Testament readings are read, they are often wrenched out of their original and intended literary and theological context in the structure of the Old Testament book from which they come.²

The most prominent books in lectionaries include Isaiah, Jeremiah, Genesis, Exodus, and Deuteronomy. Citations from other Old Testament books rapidly fall off. For example, the present Common Lectionary includes only three readings from rather large books like Numbers, Job, Proverbs, and Daniel. There are only two readings from the important prophet Amos. The lectionary includes only one reading in the three-year cycle from each of the following books: Leviticus, Joshua, 2 Chronicles, Nehemiah, Ecclesiastes, Jonah, Habakkuk, Haggai, and Zechariah. No readings at all come from Judges, 1 Chronicles, Ezra, Esther, Song of Solomon, Lamentations, Obadiah, and Nahum. In fact, of the 779 chapters which make up the 39 books of the Old Testament, only parts of 133 chapters are ever read in congregations which follow the Common Lectionary. Clearly, a vast treasure field of Scriptural texts lies uncultivated by many preachers.³

What Are Some of the Old Testament Treasures We Have Lost?

In the present shape of most lectionaries, eighty percent of the Old Testament witness is never even read in congregational worship, much less preached. It is like taking the Boston Symphony Orchestra and stripping it of all but twenty percent of its players. The result would be a puny echo of the power and richness of the symphony at full strength. What happens when we strip down the Old Testament to twenty percent of its full voice? What theological emphases are lost? What specific texts could supplement the New Testament witness and address more fully pressing concerns in our day?

There are several theological emphases which the Old Testament uniquely

or more fully develops than the New Testament. These Old Testament emphases could provide needed and refreshing new resources for many proclaimers of the Word.

1) *The Stewardship of Creation*. As we move toward the twenty-first century, issues of ecology and environment loom large. The Old Testament provides unique resources for a theology of creation. Some of those resources are rarely included in lectionary readings. An example is the series of laws in Leviticus 25. Christians typically have little interest in these detailed laws which make up this Pentateuchal book. But the theology of the land and its care reflected in this chapter is profound indeed. Leviticus 25 instructs God's people not to exploit the resources which God has given but to nurture them. The land, like the human, is to participate in regular periods of sabbath rest so that it can be renewed and regenerated for future generations.

Moreover, Leviticus 25 reminds the hearer that we do not own the land or other resources which make life possible. Rather, we are temporary stewards of the earth which will remain long after we have traveled our brief journey of life. Thus, God speaks in Leviticus 25:23:

The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me.

Genesis, the Psalms, Job, and Isaiah are other places from which a theology of creation may be developed. But Leviticus 25 is a significant voice which should not be overlooked. In an age of expanded global awareness and interdependence, the Old Testament's view on God's care for all the earth and the whole creation and the role of stewardship which humans are to play should be highlighted to their fullest extent.

2) *God and the Ordinary Life*. We are naturally attracted to dramatic events, miracles, and the spectacular. The dramatic events associated with Jesus and the early church sometimes lead the believer to ask, "Why isn't my life filled with such miracles or excitement?" The Old Testament's response, garnered from centuries of experience, is that the people of God do not always live out of the display of great miracles or the rush of dramatic events. The Old Testament affirms God's ongoing and blessing activity which works in hidden and quiet ways to sustain creation and life. It is a perspective on life that may find resonance among humans living in a technologically centered and postmodern world.⁴

Those often dreaded genealogies of Genesis which drone on and on about so-and-so begetting so-and-so are actually concrete expressions of the conviction of this quiet blessing activity of God in spite of human rebellion. Weaving in and out of the Genesis narratives of human sin and rebellion (Eden, Cain and Abel, flood, Babel, family struggles), the eleven genealogies of Genesis reflect the quiet blessing activity of God. The genealogies are the relentless drumbeat of God's sustaining grace in spite of the explosions and disruptions caused by human sin. A preacher who is willing to appreciate a genealogical way of doing theology may recover a preachable treasure found in a most unlikely place.

Other Old Testament traditions which uphold God's involvement in the most ordinary and mundane elements of life include the wisdom tradition of

Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Proverbs affirms the human's need in many things in life to simply "use your head." The maxims of Proverbs encourage the use of God's gifts of human insight, reason, and analysis in dealing with relationships, love, possessions, lifestyle and morality all under the umbrella of the "fear of the LORD" as "the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10). As a kind of balance to Proverbs, Ecclesiastes is not quite so sanguine about the ability of human wisdom or any other human endeavor to bring happiness and fulfillment. The pessimistic but still faithful spirit of Ecclesiastes may speak to those in congregations who struggle with meaninglessness, skepticism, and doubt in lives which seem overly ordinary or uneventful.⁵

Much of the later literature of the Old Testament which comes out of the postexilic period when the community of Israel struggled to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple reflects the kind of imperfect struggles and headaches of everyday life. Life in this context was not a string of successes but a limping along with slow and tedious progress mixed with frequent backsliding. Ezra and Nehemiah, some of the minor prophets like Haggai, or the so-called Third Isaiah (chapters 56-66) come out of this postexilic period and affirm God's working in and through the ups and downs of struggling lives and communities.

3) *The Reality of Evil*. We often avoid the Old Testament because it is so full of rebellion, suffering, war, and evil. Yet that is precisely one of its strengths. The Old Testament acknowledges the reality of evil in human experience; political violence and torture, sexual abuse and exploitation, murder, war, corruption, injustice, idolatry, family feuds, and the list goes on.⁶ It's all there in the Old Testament, and it's all there in our morning newspaper. The Old Testament lifts up the reality and depth of suffering and evil in the world.

Rather than avoid or ignore it, one step in dealing with such evil is to name it for what it is. One book omitted entirely from the Common Lectionary is the important book of Judges. Judges describes the growing social disintegration and chaos in one period of Israel's history when everyone "did what is right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). Judges contains some of the most powerful and carefully crafted narratives of the Old Testament including stories of Ehud, Deborah, Samson and other stories much less exemplary but much more honest about the capacity for humans to inflict terrifying evil upon each other (Judges 19-21).⁷

Preachers also typically pass over as useless the purity laws of Exodus (chapter 34), Leviticus (chapters 11, 17-26) and Numbers (chapters 12, 19, 25) which prescribe in detail what renders a person unclean for ritual worship and the procedures for making oneself clean or pure again. The purity laws include strict dietary laws, laws about things which can and cannot be touched, and laws concerning certain bodily conditions. Christians often perceive these laws as simply rules used by the Israelites to try to merit God's favor, undercutting the New Testament's message of justification by grace through faith alone. However, attention to the larger literary and theological context in which the laws of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers are set suggest they have a very different function.

The structure of Exodus 32-34 makes it clear that the laws which follow do not earn Israel the salvation which God alone gives as a gift of forgiveness

and love (Exodus 34:6-9). Indeed, after the sin of the golden calf in Exodus 32, the issue becomes this: how can a holy God dwell among a hopelessly sinful and stiff-necked people? The holiness of God in the midst of an unholy people will inevitably bring death upon them (Exodus 33:3). Thus, the laws point to human sinfulness as a powerful destructive force which requires institutional, ethical, and ritual restraints to check its force. The purity laws pertain to elements which the society deemed dangerous, not understood, and threatening.⁸ The people of Israel remained a sinful people, but institutional and legal boundaries kept the power of sin in check so as to allow space within the community for the holiness of God to dwell and work. Thus, the purity laws are a system not of "works righteousness" but a system of restraint against the forces of evil within the community. The purity laws are another means by which the Old Testament acknowledges the seriousness and reality of sin and evil.

4) *Responses to Human Suffering.* The Old Testament certainly moves beyond simply acknowledging the reality of evil in the world. The Old Testament also provides a unique set of resources for dealing with the hard questions of human suffering and evil. It is only by preaching on the wide variety of Old Testament texts that the full set of possible responses to evil may be made available to congregations. The response to human suffering may be divided into two forms: rational answers to suffering when one is at some distance from the actual experience of suffering and more immediate survival responses to evil when one is in the midst of anguish and pain.

Rational responses come in several forms. Some but not all evil is the result of our own human sin (Genesis 1-11; Deuteronomy 28-30; Joshua 7; Judges 2; 2 Kings 17; Amos). The Old Testament also affirms that God can make good come out of evil (Isaiah 40-55), that some suffering comes from evil forces (Daniel 7-12; 1 Chronicles 21:1), and that the origin of some suffering is simply an unsolvable mystery (Job, Habakkuk).

One more immediate survival response which enables the sufferer at least to endure through the pain of loss or sickness is the encouragement to express negative feelings. The lament psalms (examples include Psalms 13, 22, 140-143) are an important pastoral resource for giving people permission to voice their pain. I recall one of my former parishioners who was dying of cancer and at the same time losing his business and livelihood to foreclosure, leaving a wife and children behind. Whenever I visited him, he always said, "Pastor, read me some of those psalms" by which he meant the psalms of complaint and lament. They expressed his pain and that was what was needed to survive through another day.

Lectionaries often avoid the so-called imprecatory psalms which ask God to take revenge on one's enemies. Yet the imprecatory psalms are part of this human need to be open to God about real feelings. They allow the sufferer to relinquish desires for revenge to God and thereby free themselves from destructive feelings of hatred. Other biblical resources for expressing the negative include the confessions of the prophet in Jeremiah 10-20, or the complaints of the righteous sufferer in Job.

Other survival responses include words which encourage the sufferers to

wait and to have a realistic hope that God hears their cry and will bring relief. Examples include Exodus 3 and God's heeding the cry of the Israelite slaves in Egypt or the apocalyptic literature including the book of Daniel and sections from many of the prophets (Isaiah 24-27, 56-66, Zechariah 9-14) which call the community to hope and to endure. As we approach the turn of the millennium in the year 2000, pastors will want to deal head-on with speculations of the imminent coming of the cataclysmic end of the world and God's new reign by looking carefully at the proper use of Old Testament apocalyptic material.⁹

5) *Holding Together the Theological Tensions of Faith*. The view of God which emerges out of the present form of the Old Testament is radically monotheistic. God who is one is both righteous judge and merciful deliverer. This is the recurrent paradigm of God in the Pentateuch of Genesis-Deuteronomy. Perhaps the most striking and important example of this paradigm in the structure of the whole Pentateuch is a narrative typically excluded by lectionaries. The story is told in the book of Numbers, chapters 13-14. These chapters in Numbers recount the Israelites' first spy mission into the promised land.

The book of Numbers is one of the least studied and preached books of the Old Testament. The neglect of Numbers is not new. The early church father Origen lived in the third century A.D. and wrote a series of sermons on the book of Numbers. Already then he acknowledged the neglect of this fourth book of the Pentateuch:

"We welcome the reading of the Gospels, the Epistles and the Psalms with joy, and we very willingly fasten ourselves to their study. . . , but if we begin to read the book of Numbers, and especially certain passages in it which seem to have no usefulness. . . , we are repulsed and immediately vomit it out like nourishing but indigestible and bad tasting food."¹⁰

In spite of this general opinion, Origen found Numbers to be a wonderful treasure for preaching with profound theological insight mixed with some humor, an example being Balaam and his ass in Numbers 22-24. But the narrative which is at the heart of the structure and message of Numbers is in chapters 13-14. There the Israelites are about to enter the promised land for the first time since leaving Egypt. However, they refuse to enter and receive the gift of the land from God because they are afraid of the size and strength of the Canaanite inhabitants.

The whole story of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers has prepared for this one glorious moment of at last entering the promised land, and the people say to God, "No thank you." This comes as the climax of an unceasing series of rebellions and grumblings all through the wilderness journey. God is so angered by the people's lack of faith that God resolves to kill the people and start all over with some other nation (Numbers 14:10-12).

Moses intercedes on behalf of the Israelites and convinces God to stay with the people. God agrees to forgive the Israelites but not without severe punishment. God pledges to give the people what they wanted: death in the wilderness over the course of the next forty years. The judgment will be severe. However, God promises that a new generation will be born in the interim; this new generation will receive the promised land. The rest of the book of

Numbers is the story of the death of the old rebellious wilderness generation and the birth of a new generation of hope and promise who stands on the edge of the promised land by the end of the book of Numbers (Numbers 26-36). This new generation functions in Numbers as a paradigm or model for each new generation of God's people who likewise stand always on the edge of the promised land with the warning and promises of the past behind them and the tangible fulfillment of those promises in the future. This stance between promise and fulfillment thus defines the posture of God's people in every age.¹¹

This neglected story and many like it hold together the profound tensions of the life of faith: God both as judge and deliverer, God as just but also forgiving, faith as leaning into the future but remembering the past, the unsettledness of being on the way and yet never quite home. The books which follow Numbers such as Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings carry forward these same tensions in their own ways. The present form of most of the books of the prophets are also structured according to this basic theological movement through judgment to the final word of hope and promise. The Old Testament, including texts whose treasures we may have ignored, can be a fruitful ground for deepening our theology and enriching our preaching.

5) *Justice, Righteousness and Life in Community*. One area which is a particularly strong contribution from the Old Testament to the whole message of Scripture is its ethical and moral concern. Contrary to a strand of Christian tradition which has held the Old Testament to be morally inferior to the ethic of the New Testament, careful study of the traditions of the Old Testament reveal a profound sophistication and deep commitment to ethical issues of justice and righteousness. The prophets are famous for their ethical concerns. But justice themes also run through the Psalms and Proverbs as well as much of the legal material. For example, the laws of Deuteronomy 15, rarely appearing in any lectionary, display a remarkable passion and urgency about issues of justice and care for the poor. In the structure of the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 15 functions as an expansion of the sabbath commandment of the Decalogue.¹² Its laws extend the notion of sabbath release for worship and rest to sabbath release of slaves and debts in order to help the poor and powerless. Worship and ethics are tied together as essential partners.

Because of its long history, the Old Testament provides ethical food for thought on a wide variety of issues: marriage and family (Genesis 12-50; Ruth), the gift of sexuality and intimacy as well as the pitfalls of adultery (Song of Solomon; 2 Samuel 11), the relationship of male and female (Genesis 1-2), the theology of the city (Genesis 11; the image of Jerusalem in the Psalms), the ethics of nations and politics (Samuel-Kings), and issues of war and peace (Joshua; Judges; Isaiah 2; 11; 2 Chronicles 28:8-15; Proverbs 1:11-19). All of these themes and issues can provide a helpful and virtually inexhaustible basis for preaching on issues of justice and ethics.¹³

What we have outlined above is but a sample of the rich treasures which the Old Testament holds for those willing to blow the dust off previously unused Old Testament texts. As with any study of the Bible, the more one explores, the more one discovers.

How Are the Treasures to Be Recovered?

We conclude with a few brief strategies for rediscovering Old Testament texts often neglected for homiletical purposes.

1) Preaching guided by lectionary texts remains a useful rule of thumb, but pastors need not follow it slavishly. Particularly in the season of Sundays after Pentecost (or Ordinary Time), deviating from the lectionary and preaching from continuous texts in a given Old Testament book over a series of several Sundays would be a refreshing change for many pastors and congregations.

2) Pastors should consciously make selections from Old Testament books which are traditionally "off the beaten path." Each of the books of the Bible have been tirelessly copied and handed down as Scripture by generations because the community of faith deemed them worthwhile and powerful witnesses to the activity of God in their midst. To ignore so much of that carefully preserved and cherished witness is to leave precious treasure in a closet.

3) Preaching from unfamiliar texts and books may mean an increased need for guidance and help in the exegetical task. The pastor should select a biblical book early on so that good critical and theological commentaries can be obtained to supplement and guide the pastor's own independent study of the text.

4) Even when preaching from Old Testament texts listed in a lectionary, the preacher should strive to pay more attention to the role of that passage within the larger structure of the whole book and its message. In this way, the integrity of the text in its original Old Testament context will be allowed to stand alongside the New Testament witness as a word of God in its own right. The Old Testament message may agree, complement, supplement, or contradict the New Testament message. In any case, a fuller hearing of Scripture is achieved by giving the Old Testament its due.

This kind of broadening of the biblical horizon will benefit both those who stand in the pulpit and those who sit in the pew week after week. Pastors will be challenged and renewed in their study of Scripture. Parishioners will likely resonate to the new stories or insights, expanding their understandings of God, self, and the world. In rediscovering the lost treasure of unfamiliar Old Testament texts, all involved will be the richer for it.

NOTES

¹ Cf. Richard Nelson, "Reading Texts in Lectionary Pairs," *Dialog* 21 (1982), 95-101.

² In light of newer literary approaches, many biblical scholars are becoming more aware of the interpretive importance of the wider literary and theological context in which a given text has been placed. Samples of such literary readings include Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives, Volume I and Volume II* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982). One commentary series which tends to employ this more wholistic but still critical study of biblical material and its theological implications is the *Interpretation* commentary series edited by James L. Mays through John Knox Press.

³ Cf. Hans Boehringer, "The Common Lectionary," *Word and World* 10 (1990), 27-32; Gerard Sloyan, "The Lectionary as a Context for Interpretation," *ibid.*, 131-138; Lloyd Bailey, "The Lectionary in Critical Perspective," *ibid.*, 139-153; and Calvin Storley, "Reclaiming the Old Testament," *Lutheran Quarterly* (1987), 487-494. I am not suggesting that the lectionary be scrapped,

but that perhaps alternative tracks be available, particularly for Old Testament readings. One track may tie Old Testament and Gospel readings together when it can be done responsibly and the other track would follow fairly consecutive readings of Old Testament texts as the norm.

⁴ For the distinction between the dramatic saving activity of God and the hidden and quiet blessing activity of God in the Bible, cf. Claus Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

⁵ The recent resurgence of interest in the wisdom traditions of the Old Testament is an important development. A judicious introduction to the biblical wisdom tradition is Kathleen O'Connor, *The Wisdom Literature* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1988). An example of an interesting incorporation of the wisdom theme into a full Old Testament theology is Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence* (New York: 1978). Excellent guidance for preaching from the book of Proverbs and from other genres of biblical literature may be found in Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), "Preaching on Proverbs," 53-65.

⁶ Cf. the intriguing study by John Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

⁷ Mieke Bal is a feminist and literary scholar who applies her deconstructionist perspective to the narratives of the book of Judges to illustrate the depth of the forces of chaos and death which permeate this book. Cf. Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry, The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

⁸ Cf. a helpful anthropological perspective on such purity laws by Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: 1966).

⁹ A brief and accessible guide to correct and incorrect ways to interpret the apocalyptic literature of the Old Testament is Paul D. Hanson, *Old Testament Apocalyptic* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987).

¹⁰ Origen, "Homily XXVII on Numbers," in *Origen* (The Classics of Western Spirituality), tr. Roland Greer (New York: Paulist Press, 1979).

¹¹ For a fuller discussion of the implications of this reading for all of the book of Numbers, see Dennis T. Olson, "The Book of Numbers," *Harpers Bible Commentary* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 182-208; and *The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New, The Framework of the Book of Numbers and the Pentateuch* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1985).

¹² Stephen Kaufmann, "The Structure of the Deuteronomic Law," *Maarav* 1 (1978-79), 105-158; cf. also Georg Braulik, "Die Abfolge der Gesetz im Dt. 12-26 und der Dekalog," in *Das Deuteronomium: Entstehung, Gestalt und Botschaft*, ed. N. Lohfink (Leuven: University Press, 1985), 252-272.

¹³ For a readable introduction to the range of the ethical material in the Old Testament, cf. Christopher J. H. Wright, *An Eye for an Eye, The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1983). A fine treatment of the methodology of using biblical material for ethical reflection is Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* (Revised edition) (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989).