

Preaching in Lent: Our Death and His

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"I have no good news for you," reported the surgeon after my wife's operation. Two years before they said, "We think we got it all," but this time the cancer had spread to many organs. "It's colon or ovarian — we can't be sure — but we'll do what we can." And the news came eight days before Lent, 1991.

In the few days before the operation we talked about life and death. "I've had a good life — much better than I ever expected and certainly deserved, but I'd like some more." I had trouble expressing such gratitude and submission and hope. Years before I had stood beside the graves of my mother and my father and our child who died at birth, but this was different. As a pastor I had stood with many beside the grave, but this was different. A partner of nearly thirty-nine years!

So with "no good news" ringing in my ears I went through Lent; sharing in the experience of chemotherapy with the dreaded side effects, followed by two more operations in May and more chemotherapy. Now after fourteen visits to the hospital in these nine months, they say, "We find no sign of cancer cells — they may be there or may return — we'll check monthly — but as of now...." We rejoice and give thanks and keep remembering the many who have walked with us through the valley of the shadow of death — seminary students and colleagues, church members, family and friends from near and far.

During the same season of Lent I taught my last class in homiletics as a full-time professor and on June 30 retired after thirty-four years at Columbia Theological Seminary. The occasion brought many words of gratitude and commendation, but still the retirement brought an end to a very important part of my life. Though nothing like the trauma of the big C, retirement does bring a kind of death. These exposures to different kinds of death in recent months have led me to understand something of what Barth meant when he said that "eschatology, rightly understood, is the most practical thing that can be thought."¹

Theme of Death

With such experiences in 1991, how do I face preaching in Lent, 1992? One plan that opens up is to focus on the theme of death, and that may be suggestive for others, though I must admit that I have heard few sermons on this theme from others or myself.

This theme commends itself because of my recent pilgrimage and because I believe many others in the pew, with or without gray hair, have a deep interest in this concern. In recent years many books on dying and death have been popular. For some weeks *Final Exit* with its discussion of suicide has made the best-sellers list in the *New York Times*. The issue of euthanasia has been faced by voters and ethicists. And the onslaught of AIDS has brought death and its threat in unexpected ways.

Still conversation about death remains bad taste in many settings. We hear that a person "passes away" rather than "dies." In the hospital they say "expired." We place bodies in "memorial parks" rather than "graveyards." In spite of constant

exposure on television, ours is a death-denying culture. A surprising number of students entering seminary have never attended a funeral, and those who have are partially protected from the tragedy of death by cosmetics or florists. One study of sympathy cards shows that only three percent mention the forbidden four letter word — DEAD. If sex was taboo in conversation 100 years ago, death is today.²

The confusing signals about death in our culture makes even more imperative serious conversation about death in the pulpit, especially since it is a recurring theme in the Bible and the creeds of the church. And Lent seems an appropriate time for concentrating on this theme. Catherine Gonzalez has suggested as themes for Lenten preaching: death, baptism, the way of the cross, and discipline, all viewed in light of the death of Jesus. In connection with death she stresses the importance of treating this theme at a time other than during the crisis caused by a death in the family. She suggests that in addition to sermons the church could offer special meetings to consider such issues as funeral policies and planning, living wills and durable power of attorney, organ donations, etc.³

A series of sermons on death with an instructional flavor reflects the way of observing Lent in early Christianity. Easter Eve was recognized as a special time for baptisms, and during preceding days candidates were given special instruction in the scriptures and creeds to prepare for this momentous event. Sometimes such instruction was offered to the whole church so that all could participate in a renewal of their own baptism.⁴ This baptismal and instructional orientation of Lent gave way in the medieval period to a heavily penitential emphasis to which the Protestant Reformers objected. The recovery of the instructional in some churches today, especially as it relates to baptism, reflects more the early intent of the observance of this season.

The ministers who follow the Common Lectionary will find that selections for Lent, Year C, do not lend themselves especially to sermons that develop the theme of death. So those desiring such a focus will need other ways of choosing their texts. One suggestion is to begin with certain articles of the Apostles' Creed, choose appropriate scripture, and allow these passages to shape the content and form of the sermons. Though always open to proof-texting, such an approach has often served the church well in enabling serious theological reflection and sensitive pastoral care.⁵ My purpose here is to identify these articles, note some of their meanings and related issues, and to suggest certain passages of scripture and other writings as resources.

The Apostles' Creed *the resurrection of the body*

This article expresses Christian hope in regard to our death, which is grounded in the earlier affirmation, "the third day he rose again from the dead." Christ's resurrection is the basis for our resurrection, and what we learn from his resurrection in the past we can hope for in our resurrection in the future. "In the Easter event *our* future has already begun!"⁶ This theme keeps recurring in Paul's writings, but it comes out most clearly in I Corinthians 15, which itself contains material for a series of sermons.⁷

In dealing with this article the preacher will need to show how different it is from belief in "the immortality of the soul." Indeed to discount this belief may be worth doing this whole series! Such a belief treats death as the great liberator, setting the captive soul free from the entrapment of the body. The doctrine comes to us from Plato and others and was picked up by Calvin and given prominence by Westminster

Assembly. It is no doubt the popular belief of many Christians today, but its limitations need to be clearly noted in preaching: it suggests that the material is evil and that all spiritual is good, it destroys the unity of the person and treats death more as a friend than an enemy, and it grounds Christian hope more in human capacity than in divine faithfulness.

Resurrection of the body points to the unity of the human person. It does not mean reassembling of bodily parts or the reanimation of the corpse. The biblical writers used “body” to refer to a human being, so resurrection of the body means resurrection of the whole person. When I die, all of me dies. When I am resurrected, all of me is resurrected. This means continuity, yet discontinuity, since God brings about a transformation that fits me for the world beyond the borders of resurrection. “When I arrive at heaven’s gate, my ‘self’ is not discarded but transformed.”⁸ What is at stake is not so much the continuation of life but the completion, the fulfillment, of life.

Words fail to describe this momentous happening, so we fall back on biblical affirmations like: “We will be like him, for we will see him as he is” (I John 3:2). “He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory” (Phil. 3:21). Or we fall back on Paul’s image of the death of a seed and the growth of a new plant (I Cor. 15:35-38). Or we fall back on relational language like: “Today you (not your soul) will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43); “I will come again and take you to myself” (John 14:3); “My desire is to depart and be with Christ” (Phil. 1:23).

The New Testament speaks of resurrection in very personal terms, but it moves beyond to a much wider social and cosmic dimension. We look to the fullness of time when God will “gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (Eph. 1:10). We look for “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev. 21:1). We are even given hope for the whole creation (Rom. 8:18ff). However we interpret these promises, they all point to the end of time for the general resurrection associated with Christ’s final coming. So the preacher faces the question raised by many in the pew: does my resurrection occur at my death or at the last day? The doctrine of the immortality of the soul was a convenient way of handling this difficulty: the “unbodied soul” goes to God at death, and at the end of time receives a resurrected body. However in preaching on resurrection rather than immortality, the preacher will at least have to address the question of what happens to believers in this long waiting period. We may point out the difficulty of applying time categories when life after death suggests eternal categories, whatever that means. Or we may follow one suggestion that believers join God in waiting for all those who belong to God and for the realization of God’s rule of justice and peace and the renewal of all creation. Or we may have to acknowledge that if we cannot hold together in one hand our personal resurrection with the general, we can hold them separately in two hands. This seems to be the conclusion of Emil Brunner:

The New Testament bears witness both to “departing and being with Christ” and to the appearing of the glory of Christ and his world of the resurrection as one and the same hope. He who believes in Jesus as the Christ knows that both things are true: I go to him and he comes to the world.⁹

life everlasting

This article points to our existence after death. Such belief affirms faith in life,

but not a vague notion of life in general. Eternal life points to quality as well as quantity. And since in Christ the eternal entered time, those who believe begin eternal life now — life lived in the light of eternity. Eternal life is “already” but “not yet” (John 3:16; I Cor. 13:12; I John 3:2).

What such a life is or will be is pictured in Revelation 21-22, though extreme modesty is called for in interpreting such apocalyptic writing. Some of the images are expressed in negatives: no sea (symbol of chaos or separation for the Hebrew), no sorrow or crying or pain or death, no curse or sin, no night. Other images are in positives: beauty and activity and plenty of room. There will be no temple or church, nor more need to hear the word of forgiveness or the call to witness. Instead there will be a city, a true community with a river flowing through its streets and leaves of trees along its banks for the healing of the nations.

Lochman features life everlasting under three headings: (1) Rest — not idleness but the goal of our pilgrimage as in the Epistle to the Hebrews (4:9); or in the words of Paul, “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding” (Phil. 4:7). Or in the most memorable lines from Augustine, “Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.” (2) Light — the understanding and perspectives when we see “face to face” (I Cor. 13:12) which replaces our limited and distorted vision. (3) Love — the bond that connects our life today with our eschatological future, the paramount gift of God’s grace, the gift that “never ends” (I Cor. 13:1 — 3,13).¹⁰

But is such an existence for all people? Many in the church keep wrestling with those biblical passages that seem to answer this question in the negative and others that point to the positive. The preacher will recognize how this question is alive in the congregation and address it in light of his or her interpretation of scripture and the creeds of the church. It is important that the warnings through the scripture be heard with clarity and force as well as the words of hope and encouragement. Here is how “A Declaration of Faith” tried to bring these together:

All things will be renewed in Christ....
As he stands at the center of our history,
 we are confident that he will stand at its end.
He will judge all people and nations,
Evil will be condemned
 and rooted out of God’s good creation.
There will be no more tears or pain.
All things will be made new.
The fellowship of human beings with God and each other
 will be perfected.¹¹

communion of saints

This is a third article of the Creed which relates to the meaning of our death in relation to the death of Christ. “Saints” often suggests extraordinary persons with brilliant records, but according to the New Testament the term refers to ordinary sisters and brothers in Ephesus and Rome and Jerusalem. Indeed, if the word can apply to the kind of people described in I Corinthians (1:2), then ordinary Christians from Decatur to Detroit to Delhi fit the term.

Early interpretations emphasized communion of *departed* saints and bonded

together the church militant with the church triumphant. That developed in an unhealthy way with the veneration of the departed, but healthy development could mean an inclusive vision of the church not only in space but in time, ecumenicity understood historically as well as geographically. Remembering those nearest and dearest to us as well as the host of the well known and the anonymous of God's folk can increase gratitude for our heritage and give strength for "the race that is set before us" (Heb. 11-12).

Communion with *contemporary* saints is a theme that can also deepen our understanding and preparation for our death. From the earliest days of the church we see expressions of faith as life shared with others in the community (Acts 2:42ff; 4:32ff), and the scene of the final judgment points to a solidarity with "the least of these" (Matt. 25:31ff). So love that never ends in time or eternity (I Cor. 13) reaches out especially to the neglected and the marginalized, and in a series of sermons on death the importance of comforting the mourners can be emphasized (II Cor. 1).¹²

In addition to the spoken sermon the celebration of the Lord's Supper also "preaches" the communion of saints. It points to communion with Christ as well as communion with both departed and contemporary saints and becomes the focal point for joining the vertical dimension of our faith with the horizontal, the theological with the ethical.

Guidelines

We began with some of the reasons for considering death as a central focus for preaching in Lent and moved on to consider three articles of the Apostles' Creed around which to organize these sermons. Now we mention briefly some guidelines which may give shape and flavor to this preaching.

(1) Though this article has dealt more with our death, our preaching needs to stay in close contact with Christ's death. Indeed the articles of the Creed considered above grow out of the articles from "crucified" to "judge the quick and the dead." Attention to his death can free us from the extremes of escapism and triumphalism, or of taking death too seriously or too casually. And it can keep our focus on God's faithfulness rather than our own. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8), so we always try to envision our future in light of the past.

(2) In speaking about death and other aspects of eschatology we encounter many questions where we are tempted to say more than the Bible does and to satisfy curiosity more than to strengthen faith. So we need to take care in maintaining modesty about our knowledge, and sometimes even silence. Such modesty is also called for in dealing with symbolic language connected with the end time, such as "trumpet," "shout," "clouds," etc. (I Thess. 4).

(3) Preaching on death calls for a variety in moods to reflect the upbeat and downbeat moods in which scripture speaks of death. And the overall mood of the preacher should be one who is confessing more than explaining.

(4) In preaching through Lent we need to keep remembering Ash Wednesday. "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19). So often these words are heard only as a call for penance, but Walter Brueggemann has shown how they stress creatureliness in such a way that by God's creative breath we are creatures who remember that God remembers and also "forgives, heals, redeems, crowns, satisfies, vindicates" (Ps. 103:1-6). Such interpretation moves toward the other end of our time line where we return to earth, dust to dust, ashes to ashes, but also to God's

resurrecting power for the life beyond.¹³

(5) For preaching in every season, but especially during Lent, we need to keep the pulpit close to the communion table. Proclaiming “the Lord’s death until he comes” (I Cor. 11:26) sheds a lot of light on our death. And regarding the Lord’s Supper from the Easter standpoint moves it beyond a funeral meal to a joyous meal like a wedding feast. Here we have communion with Jesus Christ, and communion with saints, departed and contemporary. And thus we get a foretaste and preview of heaven. So we pray, “Thy table come on earth as it is in heaven.”

NOTES

¹ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper, 1959), 154.

² See William E. Phipps, *Death—Confronting the Reality* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1987) which provides much material on the confusing signals about death in our culture. Also Liston O. Mills, ed., *Perspectives on Death* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969).

³ Catherine G. Gonzalez, “From Death to Life: Themes for Lenten Preaching,” *Journal for Preachers*, Vol. XIV, No. 2 (Lent, 1991) 11-15.

⁴ See Cheslyn Jones, et al. eds., *The Study of Liturgy* (New York: Oxford, 1980), 95ff. Those interested in services of baptismal renewal today can see Office of Worship PCUSA, *Holy Baptism and Services for the Renewal of Baptism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985).

⁵ See William J. Carl, III, *Preaching Christian Doctrine*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

⁶ Jan M. Lochman, *The Faith We Confess* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 235, an excellent interpretation of the Apostles’ Creed to which I am indebted for much information and inspiration.

⁷ See Charles B. Cousar, *A Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) for fresh interpretation of this chapter as well as other passages related to our theme.

⁸ Lochman, 244.

⁹ Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith and Consummation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 393. Quoted by Shirley Guthrie in *Christian Doctrine* (Richmond: CLC, 1968), a rich resource for interpreting the Creed. Other resources not mentioned above include: Hendrikus Berkhof, *Well-Founded Hope* (Richmond: John Knox, 1969), George A. Buttrick, *So We Believe, So We Pray* (New York: Abingdon, 1959), Hans Küng, *Eternal Life?* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1984), Albert C. Winn, *A Christian Primer* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990).

¹⁰ Lochman, 252ff.

¹¹ “A Declaration of Faith,” Ch. 10, lines 14, 23-31. Other sections of this creed can be useful in preaching and in other parts of the service.

¹² See Robert Hughes, *A Trumpet in Darkness—Preaching to Mourners* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) for a discussion of preaching at funerals. Especially helpful are his presentation on different types of death and their implications for preaching: prolonged, sudden, untimely, timely, sought-for, unbeliever’s, and anonymous, and also the correlation between particular dynamics of grief and specific theological questions.

¹³ Walter Brueggemann, “Remember, You Are Dust,” *Journal for Preachers*, Vol. XIV, No. 2 (Lent, 1991) 3-10.