

Preaching Through Pentecost

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The Sundays after Pentecost represent a major shift in the church calendar and the formation of the Common Lectionary. From Advent to Pentecost, the calendar has retraced the life of Christ and the Lectionary has had a dominating Christological hermeneutic behind it. The Advent-Christmas-Epiphany cycle and the Lent-Easter-Pentecost cycle all had lections that were interrelated, intentionally chosen for their relationship to the calendar. Always, the Gospel lection was the primary selection with the other choices serving as commentaries or subsidiaries to it. The ancient Roman Catholic principle of *lectio selecta* prevailed. In a sense the calendar took precedence over the canon. The passage of time was given unmistakable Christocentric significance.

After Pentecost, the Sundays of the church year function in a different capacity. Pentecost to Advent centers on the life of the church, the new community of faith created by the Holy Spirit. It is not the life of Christ that is paramount but the teachings of Christ that are paramount. The church begins the critical task of extrapolating the meaning of discipleship, the Kingdom talk in Christ's teachings, the stories by which the church forms and reforms its life, the eschatological framework of God's unfolding action in history. The lections for the Sundays after Pentecost are not intentionally interrelated around an event or theme. The weekly Gospel lections are not given primary standing. All the lections are chosen for semicontinuous reading. The old Protestant principle of *lectio continua* prevails. In a sense, the canon takes precedence over the calendar. The passage of time is nudged in the direction of a theocentric emphasis.

The Sundays After Pentecost

Pentecost is not actually a season. For that reason, the Sundays after Pentecost are often referred to as "ordinary time," or Sundays of the year, or even Proper 15 or Proper 29 (always the last Sunday after Pentecost). Each Sunday stands on its own as the Lord's Day. There is no continuous thematic thread holding all the Sundays together. Not even the Holy Spirit who creates the church can claim it as a season of the Holy Spirit. (God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not sequentially separated out through the course of the church year.)¹

With the semicontinuous reading of all three lections for the Sundays after Pentecost, the preacher is introduced to a different hermeneutical emphasis. No longer is the First Lesson, Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures, subordinated to the Gospel lection for the day. The hermeneutical principle of promise and fulfillment in which the Old Testament is the locus of promise and the New Testament the locus of fulfillment is not operative in the selection of the text. The Hebrew Scriptures are not viewed as incomplete, only legitimated by the Gospel which follows them. The Old Testament lections are understood to be able to stand on their own merit as revelations of God's action. The First Lesson is on a par with the Third Lesson.

The same assertion, of course, can be made for the Epistle Lessons for the Sundays after Pentecost. The texts have been chosen without regard for the other two readings and they stand in no hermeneutical relationship to them. Like the Hebrew

Scriptures, the Epistle texts have revelatory efficacy of their own on their own terms. The preacher is under no obligation to submit the First and Second Lessons to the primacy of the Gospel Lesson. There is no need to weave together the three lections for the day into a preaching moment. It may even be preferred that each lection be heard by its own singular voice. The Sundays after Pentecost provide the preacher with a freer hermeneutical range than the first half of the church calendar year.

In addition, the principle of semicontinuous readings after Pentecost gives the preacher the opportunity to work with a biblical book. In so doing, the preacher is embracing the historic Protestant methodology of moving through scripture book by book. The preacher can study and proclaim passages in their fullest context. The result may be not only a greater awareness of individual biblical writers but an awareness of the diversity of theologies and voices in scripture.

Perhaps it is an advantage for the preacher that the Sundays after Pentecost stand on their own. In many congregations, the months of June, July, and August are marked by vacations, long weekends away, and inconsistent attendance by congregants compared to the rest of the year. Each Sunday has its own lectionary character, complete by itself without having to fit into an overarching theme.

On the other hand, the Sundays after Pentecost provide the preacher with many opportunities for series preaching. The lectionary preacher would do well to pay particular attention to the Old Testament lessons. Likewise, the Epistle lessons invite the preacher to offer a series of sermons from books. Luke, who records many of the parables of Jesus, suggests yet another kind of series. Each Sunday is complete unto itself but seen within the larger biblical context. The freedom and diversity of the Sundays after Pentecost can be a rich resource for the creative, biblical preacher.

Homiletical Possibilities

A. With an eye toward doing some series preaching, the Elijah-Elisha cycle invites consideration. The Elijah narrative begins on June 21, 1992, with I Kings 19 (Proper 7). The lectionary “slices” the chapter into smaller sections over Proverbs 6, 7, and 8. Since Proper 6 is not used this year, the preacher may wish to combine Proverbs 6 and 7 in order to incorporate the beginning of the narrative.

Taken as a whole, the chapter suggests four divisions of movement and setting:

1. Elijah, under threat of Jezebel, flees to Beersheba (vv. 1-3).
2. Elijah, depressed and hopeless, takes refuge in the wilderness (vv. 4-8).
3. Elijah is confronted by God and given a new mission (vv. 9-18).
4. Elijah obeys and commissions Elisha as his helper (vv. 19-21).

The preacher will be aware of giving too much attention to the “still, small voice” in God’s epiphany to Elijah. Much has been made about the “gentle stillness.” But the narrative is not essentially about the nature of divine revelation. “The unwary reader tends to assume that God is really meant to be present in the enigmatic small voice. This is a completely unwarranted assumption, however.”² The Epiphany makes clear that God will not let Elijah go. God is to be feared even more than Jezebel, earthquake, wind, or fire. Above all, God is to be obeyed.

The chapter moves from despair to deployment, from fear to faith, from self-pity to self-assurance, from exhaustion to energy, as a result of an encounter with the God who claims and commissions. It is a journey with many parallels for faith battered congregants in the pew.

Proper 9 picks up the story in I Kings 21. The lection includes only the beginning

and ending of the story associated with Naboth's vineyard, but the whole story will need to be retold if not read. It is a familiar story which raises the questions of justice, power, and the relationship between prophet and king (church and state). What an incredible coincidence that the narrative is appointed for Sunday, July 5, 1992.

The narrative begins in covetousness and concludes in contrition. In between, Jezebel is the villain, Naboth the victim, Elijah commissioned to speak on behalf of the God of justice, and Ahab who is sentenced by God for his complicity.

The narrative makes clear that the realm of social justice is God's realm. For a national that constantly defines and argues over the boundary between church and state, this narrative is as contemporary as debates in Congress and decisions in City Hall. The text will compel the preacher to let the Fourth of July weekend Sunday become an occasion for reflecting on God's solidarity with the powerless and God's will being played out in the political arena.

Proper 10, which focuses on II Kings 2:1-14, is a passage about transition. The narrative centers on the transfer of power from Elijah to Elisha. The crux of the passage revolves around Elisha's request for a "double share" of Elijah's spirit. Walter Brueggemann has this to say about the request: "He asks for power which flows free and unadministered. He asks for the authority, even audacity to withstand the rationality and bureaucracy of the king. He asks for the capacity to work newness in a world which appears closed and fixed and settled."³ The narrative does not lend itself to easy preaching, yet the authorization of Elisha as prophet is a witness to the power of God to liberate, to transform, to bring newness - the substance of good news for any congregation.

Proper 11, 12, and 13 which conclude the Elisha narrative all attest to the power of God to bring life to death, hope to hopelessness. The respective episodes have to do with Elisha and the Shunammite woman; with the healing of Naaman, the leper; and with Elisha on his death bed. It will be important for the preacher not to rationalize away the "miracles" reported, but to attest to the power of God which reaches beyond normal expectations to make possible that which seems impossible. For congregations enslaved by a closed technology, a recessive economy, the fear that "nothing will change," preaching from these narratives can witness to a God who is always life giving. That is good news.

The Elijah-Elisha cycle can provide the preacher with the excitement of sustained narrative preaching. The texts have characters, a setting, a plot line, episodes, movement, tension to be resolved. They are stories to be told, savored, and lived into. The lectionary preacher might even be stimulated to turn one of the narratives into a dialogue sermon (e.g. Ahab and Elijah) or a first person sermon (e.g. Elisha on his death bed.) Rather than the doldrums of summertime, the Elijah-Elisha cycle can birth an uncommon witness to the power of God at work among us.

B. Another series to entice the lectionary preacher could be developed from the Epistle Lessons. The six lections from I and II Timothy begin Proper 19 on September 13, 1992. In many communities, the Sunday after Labor Day is the beginning of a new church program year, an opportune time to focus on readings that have to do with life in the community of faith. I and II Timothy, along with Titus, have, of course, long been called the "pastoral epistles" because of their caring concern for life inside the church. The epistles were most probably written after the time of Paul in his name when the church was undergoing internal conflicts over "orthodoxy" and "heresy" and "false teachers." Given the current struggle and charges in many of our Protestant denominations over precisely the same issues, I and II Timothy are incredibly

contemporary.

Proper 19 (I Timothy 1:12-17) goes right to the heart of the gospel, God's abundant grace and mercy freely given for sinners. Verse 15 expresses the synopsis view - "that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." Mention is made of Paul's former life as a persecutor, and God's accepting grace that resulted in a revolution in his life. Clearly, it is implied that if it could happen to Paul, "the foremost of sinners," it could happen to us all. Fittingly, the lection ends in a doxology.

The text may seem like a natural for a revival-tent meeting, but it is a natural wherever sinners gather in any congregation. "Born again" Christianity is not limited to charismatics or pentecostals, but a reality available to the whole household of God. What could be more appropriate than to begin a new church program year with a sermon that brings to life the heart of the gospel, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. All you can do with such grace is give thanks, share it, shout it abroad, sing it: "Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me."

The theme for I Timothy 2:1-7 (Proper 20) is universality. The church is urged to pray for everyone, including rulers and political leaders. Christ came as mediator, "a ransom for all." Therefore, we are all in need of prayer, including political leaders who provide order and stability in which God's Word can flourish.

It wasn't too long ago when praying for Iraqi soldiers and civilians was considered by some as almost treasonous. Yet to pray for political leaders does not suggest partisanship, but a recognition of their responsible role in God's scheme of things, to bring order and peace for the people within their care. It is a "calling" to be supported by the church. In so doing, all may be saved which is God's ultimate goal.

In Proper 21 (I Timothy 6:6-19), the focus is on those opponents, especially money, which threaten the well-being of the church.⁴ The lection contains the familiar phrase - "for the love of money is the root of all evils." True though it may be, it is the greed and obsession with gain resulting from such love that can destroy the community of faith. To be snared by the allure of wealth is to risk losing the contentment of the life of faith. Individualistic gain can disrupt community.

It is reported that once John D. Rockefeller was asked how much money needed in order to be happy. Quick came the reply: "A little bit more than I have." Money has power to seduce. Our consumer society knows a lot about the perverting power of money. What was it Jesus said about serving God and Mammon? The church is advised "to fight the good fight of faith" in Jesus as Lord and find contentment in him. Those who are rich in possessions are called to a stewardship of generosity and good deeds mindful of the One from whom all riches come.

The Epistle Lesson for Worldwide Communion Sunday is II Timothy 1:1-14. In typical Pauline fashion, the letter begins with a greeting, followed by thanksgiving for Timothy's faith that had been nurtured by his mother and grandmother, and then a call to take courage and endure his share of suffering for the gospel, bearing witness without embarrassment, and holding fast to the apostolic truth of the gospel. The lection reads like a charge to a young ordinand.

As the church gathers for Eucharist around the Lord's Table on October 4, 1992, it can remember with thanksgiving the faith that has been bequeathed by those who have gone before. After all, faith is always only one generation away from extinction. But even more, the church makes eucharist for the gospel of Jesus Christ who has "abolished death and brought life," all a gift of grace. Such a gospel is the occasion for "unashamed" witness and joyful celebration.

Proper 23 moved to II Timothy 2:8-15. At a time when the church is beset by false teachers, the faithful are urged to remember the central most proclamation; faith in Jesus Christ, the risen Lord. It is in dying and rising with Christ that the church is saved. Such an affirmation is the basic message, "the word of truth." Do not be ashamed to tell it again and again.

Some say that we are what we eat, or what we wear, or what we drive. The text suggests that we are what we remember. We are called to remember Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. Being baptized into Christ's death and resurrection, we belong to him. In remembering whose we are, we will remember who we are.

The last lection from II Timothy is 3:14-5:5. Continuing the theme of remembering Timothy is urged to remember the scriptures (read Old Testament as the prophecy of Christ). The text includes the singular phrase - "all scripture is inspired by God." The scriptures are a veritable treasure chest for the believer: source for teaching, reproof, correction, training in faithful living. With such a treasure at hand, Timothy is urged to preach "in season and out of season," being steadfast in the face of false doctrines as he conducts his ministry.

Debates about how the Bible should be interpreted "rock" the contemporary church. Perhaps the preacher will want to dwell on one phrase - "all scripture is inspired by God." Perhaps the preacher will want to speak about the authority of scripture as the primary source for faith and practice in the church. Perhaps the preacher will want to speak about the role of scripture in the reform of the church. The text and the current climate in the church come together to make a lively preaching moment that can fulfill the oft heard request - "give us biblical preaching."

Faithful biblical preaching can turn the "ordinary time" of the Sundays after Pentecost into "extraordinary time."

NOTES

¹ Hickman, Saliers, Stookey, White, eds., *Hand Book of the Christian Year*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 241.

² Richard Nelson, *Interpretation, First and Second Kings* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), 124.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Knox Preaching Guides, 2 Kings* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 11.

⁴ Gail R. O'Day, *Proclamation 4, Pentecost 2, Series C* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 62.