

Sustaining the Weary with a Word: Preaching Lenten Texts

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For too long now Lent has been viewed as a bleak and weary season. What might happen, I wonder, if our Lenten hermeneutic was informed by a discipline of fasting from the ways that weary the earth and of feasting on the word and ways of God? A look to our origins reminds us that the season of Lent was slow in taking shape. The early church first marked the Pascha—the Christian Passover—with a nocturnal festival of Saturday-Sunday that commemorated both the passion and the resurrection. Over time an extended period of baptismal preparation took shape. First a six-day fast (our current Holy Week) and then an added thirty-four day fast (Lent) became the forty day fast of disciplined purification in preparation for the Easter Vigil.¹ But Lent did not include Sundays, since fasting was forbidden on the Sabbath. So, the Lenten season of preparation is the forty weekdays (Monday-Saturday) that begin with Ash Wednesday and conclude with Holy Saturday.

In the church that I inhabit the disciplined marking of the season of Lent is, once more, slowly taking shape.² Not so long ago we imagined that the odd practices of our forbears were no longer necessary. Dorothy Sayers spoke for many when she said, “I would like to give up church for Lent!” But in recent years it has dawned on us that we are unprepared for the story of abandonment, absence and awe that is the crucial center of our storied life. So we have, haltingly, recovered the ancient practice of a forty-day season of preparation. Haltingly, because we stumble over the tradition, often misapprehending its intent. We hear of fasting and know that a society of excess is hardly an easy candidate for the denial of satiation as a necessary practice of discipleship. Most of us simply ignore the ancient wisdom of fasting (though it is hard to imagine a more appropriate way to share the suffering of our global neighbors—of every species—in our bodies). Instead of disciplined fasting during the forty days, we make our Sabbath worship and preaching the focus of the hard place of obedience. “Hallelujahs” are not sung. The Resurrection story is put away. The looming shadow of the impending cross makes for a growing sense of trouble. Preachers realize that if Lenten discipline is to be practiced anywhere, it is up to them to preach sermons that fast from joy and feed only on the demanding way of the Suffering One who calls his disciplined church to follow.

Yet, see what happens once the ancient ways of Lent take shape in our bodies and in the Body of Christ that is the North American church. Then we begin to glimpse that the necessary way to prepare for the loss of everything that we depend upon on Good Friday and for the gaping void of absence on Holy Saturday and for the stunning newness of Easter Sunday is to practice making room for aching loss in our days and in our bodies. Fasting is the time-honored means by which our grandparents in the faith learned to live the story that is embodied in the dying and rising of our baptism. But they did not fast on Sunday. Sunday is the day of Resurrection. On the Sabbath—even

in Lent—the Risen One is present as both generous host and nameless stranger at the Lord's Table. See what happens when the Sundays in Lent are not hard days of fasting but Sabbath rest filled with feasting at the Table and on the Word.³ Preaching is then the life-giving act of offering manna to a people whose forty-day fast is a wilderness journey toward the promise of all things made new. The Lenten texts speak a fresh word when heard through the rediscovered hermeneutic of a congregation that practices making room for loss in its dispersed bodies during the week and then gathers on Sunday as one body at the banqueting table.⁴

The Season of Mercy (Ash Wednesday)

"Miserere." Have mercy. It is the first word in Psalm 51 and the heart of Lenten practices. Confronted by the potent forces of death that, finally, turn everything to ash, we come before the mercy seat with one prayer on our lips: "Miserere." Some come, like David "after he had gone in to Bathsheba" (as the Psalter tells us) drenched in shame, seeking the mercy of some miraculous way to reconcile relationships that are surely irreconcilable. The church comes aware that its life is lived under the influence of a powerful narcotic that addicts an entire culture to maintaining dominance and control at terrible cost to other peoples and to the entire planet. It, too, is ashamed and helpless in the face of the forces that overwhelm its desire to live faithfully with God and neighbor. The trouble is deep-seated and an old story; it has been with us since before we can remember: "Indeed, I was born guilty" (v. 5). Like Allegri's famous version of the "Miserere" our cry for mercy is a haunting, high-pitched wail that nearly transcends earthen limits as it reaches the vault of heaven. And like that beloved setting of Psalm 51, the cry for mercy slowly shifts from aching wail to beautiful, pregnant expectancy. The Psalmist knows what the church trusts in Lent—that the God met in power at the edge of the Red Sea is one who is marked by "steadfast love" and "abundant mercy" (v. 1). This Maker of heaven and earth is one who has power to create a good earth where there was only formless void and chaotic storm. So this One is called upon when the storm breaks out once more: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me" (v. 10). This is not a simple matter of re-forming the heart and soul of the church. It is not merely a need for revision of the structures of the economy in the face of a catastrophic future. It is time now for the creative word of Yahweh to utter newness, which also means that it is time for the end of seductive old habits.

Driven into Wilderness (Lent 1)

The texts for the first Sunday in Lent leave no time for the church to catch its breath. In Genesis and in 1 Peter, the community is reminded of the dangerous journey between the old and the new that it now embarks upon. The inhabitants of the Ark weather the storm. Peter points to the font as the contemporary location of that ancient journey out of death to life. And in Mark's daring telling, God's own Beloved is Spirit-driven into chaotic danger. This Lenten wilderness is no romantic setting. Like a hiker who wanders just off the beaten track in Vancouver's scenic mountains, so a wilderness wanderer is always only a misstep away from terror. All of this comes as warning to the church that enters the forty-day season of fasting. There is real danger and that trouble is never far from the seemingly tame surface of our days. This is not a ritual game. We are not just playing at church. The church really is being driven out

of its familiar identity. The Spirit will not leave it—will not leave us—alone. We live in a liminal moment. Like an adolescent letting go of childhood, or like an elder facing death, we live on the threshold between the only identity we have known and the life beyond that is both longed for and feared. In traditional cultures such shifts in identity call for removal from society. The threshold is crossed through a time of testing and endurance, a time of proving and discovering. The forty days of the Lenten threshold mirror the long journey—forty years and more—that is the North American church's time of testing and danger, discovery and formation on the margins of the culture it once shaped and dominated. We are tempted to wish it were not so. Our familiarity with comfort and ease makes us wary of hardship, deprivation, and danger. But the good news is written all over such Lenten journeys in the wilderness. A world trapped in deathly ways is desperate for courageous communities that dare to abandon the consumptive habits that are consuming us. In Lent we practice leaving those ways behind. It is a hard but wonderfully necessary journey to newness. The church in Lent is like the community of riders in the Tour de France confronting the difficult days of steep mountain climbs. Onlookers to that sight traditionally call out to the riders: "*Courage, courage.*" This is the sound of faithful preaching and presiding at the beginning of Lent. It is not the harsh sound of nagging, berating, or cajoling. Rather it is the testimony of a witness who dares to tell the truth about the hard and necessary road ahead, all the while pointing to the One whom death did not defeat, and saying: "*Courage, courage.*"

Forsaken yet Promised (Lent 2)

The odd promises of God dominate this Sunday's texts of Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 17:1-16 and Romans 4:13-25) and of Jesus (Mark 8:31-38). The promises are odd because they promise abundance to a people who are evidently forsaken (Psalm 22:23-31). Some peculiar reverse logic is at work in these texts. We imagine that the forsaken go without and that the abundant live abundantly. Yet YHWH continues to invite the barren, withered centenarians into fruitful relationship: "she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her" (Gen. 17:16). And Jesus invites those with abundance to join his own forsaken journey: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mk. 8:34). Trusting in these wild promises of abundance becoming forsaken existence and forsakenness giving way to fruitfulness is the life-blood of trust in the Lord. Paul delights in Abraham's pure, clear faithfulness. In this he knows well what the lectionary leaves unspoken—that Abraham's strong faith includes his hilarious disbelief: "Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed" (Gen. 17:17). The church we have known has too easily forgotten that the promises of God are almost beyond belief and that the normative response of even the most faithful mother or father in the faith to such impossibility is sidesplitting laughter. On the other hand, the church we know is all too familiar with Peter's reflexive rebuke of Jesus' promised way to life. Peter knows the Messiah's prophetic prediction of harsh suffering, of mass rejection, and of a terrorizing lynching cannot possibly be orthodox. Peter knows this is no way to be the Messiah or to successfully build a church. Jesus knows Peter's satanic verse of rebuke is voiced whenever the church believes the new life of God's promise can be lived without dying to the grasping ways that reveal our desperate fear of loss. Lenten practices of hosting loss and of experiencing the taste of forsakenness open our life to

the daring truth that is the upside-down gospel of God. Blocked wombs and barren ~~futures—personal, ecclesial and global—are not what they seem. These are the~~ locations of God's doings in the world. ~~Lenten preachers risk speaking this hilarious, unorthodox truth.~~ And they are grateful for a listening community whose life together tells the world: "Amen. That's the truth" (1 Thess. 2:13).

Ways that are Wise, Sweet, Foolish, Trouble (Lent 3)

The forty days—like the forty years in the wilderness—propel the people of the Way back onto the ways of YHWH ("I am what I am up to" – Exod. 3:14). This Torah way is more precious than gold to the called community; it is "sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb" (Ps. 19:10). Remember the rabbinic practice of ~~placing drops of honey on the Torah scroll and inviting toddlers to taste the sweetness of the law.~~ Imagine our imbedded communal memory of the Torah as gift of liberation, not tool of oppression. The original ten ways guide the community into two seminal commands: love of God (no other gods, no abusing God's name, keep the Sabbath) and love of neighbor (no killing, no infidelity, no lying under oath). "On these two commandments," says Jesus, "hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt. 22:39). The ancient wise ways of YHWH are not overruled by the new covenant ways of Jesus, as Christendom has so often implied. Rather, in the Crucified One we meet one whose life bears witness to the truth of the LORD's law and prophets. In the crucifixion of this one whose story fulfills the Torah (Matt. 5:17), we glimpse the wisdom of God that makes "foolish the wisdom of the world" (1 Cor. 1:20). Jesus lives the law of God and is convicted of sedition. The Risen Christ calls a community to follow in his path, trusting in God's power to overcome the deathly powers that appear triumphant. These wise, sweet ways of YHWH that are "the message about the cross" (1 Cor. 1:18) trip up the religious and bring on the scorn of the worldly-wise (1 Cor. 1:22). Most troubling of all, when law-abiding Jesus shows up in our carefully constructed religious bureaucracy, he turns the tables on our worldly ways of marketing divine justice and mercy to a people shopping for meaning (Jn. 2:13-22). The truth of the wise, sweet, foolish ways of God are to be learned in "the temple of his body" (Jn. 2:21). Entering the Messiah's dying, dead, and rising body is the way for Christ's beloved communal disciple—the church—to be figured in the ways of God's Torah. Lenten preaching of this awesome Living Word inevitably leads to recovered rich practices of Lenten presiding at this Lord's Table where we taste his death and drink in his new life and become his Living Body.

Salvation as Detoxification (Lent 4)

By the fourth week of fasting we begin to sense something of the impatience of the ancient Israelites with Moses and with God: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food" (Num. 21:5). Is it "no food" or "this miserable food"? In either case it is not the diet that even working-class slaves have grown accustomed to in the booming economy of Egypt. They begin to wonder if the disciplined adventure into the unknown of the wilderness still holds promise. The church of our day gingerly begins an uncharted pilgrimage to the promise of new life. It does not take long before there is a widespread longing for the beloved captivities and familiar slaveries of the good old days. But before there is time to turn back we have a much bigger problem

on our hands. Poisonous snakes are everywhere, biting and killing. They are sent by the LORD says the text. It is such a strange tale, so far from our experience. Except that we, too, find ourselves sick with poison. The toxins of our age are addictive behaviors that will not let us go. The desperate need to accumulate overtakes our culture and us, governing our politics and economics (~~so, like an addict desperate for a fix, Western foreign policy and military deployment is dominated by the necessity of an uninterrupted supply of oil~~). Is this toxic acquisitiveness the judgment of God upon our 'enlightened' age? The text hints at the possibility. But then the texts go on. They go on to portray salvation as detoxification: "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (Jn. 3:14-15). We have imagined that detox centers exist for the down and out. We have portrayed the church as home to good, upstanding citizens in need of pastoral reminding to be better people. We have not imagined that our congregations are desperate to go cold turkey. Now, four weeks into the Lenten fast, we are daily aware of the culture of excess that tempts our bodies and souls into poisoned addiction. Gathered for worship on the Sabbath day, we look to the One lifted up on the cross and see the saving antidote to our cravings. To trust in him—to have faith in his power to lead his people through death to the old ways into the life of God's kingdom come—is to discover abundant life. Coming to trust in Christ, learning not to return to the old, addictive patterns of fear and control, acquisition and consumption is not easy. Detoxification is the lifelong repentant journey of the baptized.⁶ As every member of A.A. knows, going clean is not possible without the "steadfast love" of the LORD (Ps. 107:1-3, 17-22). It is this Steadfast Lover who meets us at the Table, in the middle of our fast, with saving bread of life and healing cup of blessing. Hallelujah!

Looking for Glory (Lent 5)

Some Greeks come to Philip, saying: "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" (Jn. 12:21). This phrase has long been engraved on pulpits for the preacher's eyes only: "We would see Jesus." But Jesus is not so easily encountered. Philip takes Andrew, and together they tell Jesus of the congregation's desire to see him and to know him. Jesus apparently ignores their request. There is no indication that he ever meets the Greek seekers who are so eager to see him. Congregations have come to assume that glimpsing Jesus is an easy thing and that preachers can conjure him up with relative ease. But, if the truth be told, more often than not we return like Philip and Andrew, without Jesus, or, at least, without the Jesus that the Greeks and the congregation expect. For, in his response to the disciples, Jesus speaks clearly about how to set eyes on him: "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also" (Jn. 12:26). Seeing Jesus will not be a spectator sport. Jesus will be present with those who join him in the work and the life and the calling of God in the world. This is glorious work, a glorious life and a glorious calling. Jesus announces that to see him will be to see the glory of YHWH.⁷ Four times the Johannine text speaks of the glorification of God in Jesus (Jn. 12:20-33). And all the while the text pushes inevitably toward the moment when Christ is "lifted up from the earth. He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die" (Jn. 12:32-33). All four gospels agree that the glory of God is revealed in the death that Jesus dies. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all announce that, at the moment of his death, "the curtain of the temple was torn in two" (Matt. 27:51; Mk. 15:38; Lk. 23:45), revealing the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies—location of the

earthly residence of the glory of God. Those who would see Jesus in all his glory will look for Christ crucified and will join him in that terribly glorious place. We hardly imagine such ignominy to be the location of glory, so we look away and we run away. Yet we are familiar with too many scenes of cruciform terror and we long for some new news that will redeem a crucified world. Gathered at the Table set for Jesus' last supper, we rehearse the good news that this particular death redeems every death. In our practiced return to the crux of the matter we find ourselves one with the Greek-speaking centurion at the cross who sees Jesus and says: "Truly this man was God's Son" (Mk. 15:39). Then we go out to see him by sharing in his glory.

Sustaining the Weary with a Word (Palm/Passion Sunday)

"The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word" (Is. 50:4). This is the voice of the One who meets the church in its Lenten journey. Jesus speaks, and is, a word of sustenance. The path his disciples are to follow is not the wearying road of trouble that it appears. His cross walk is finally the sustaining way and truth and life. Nonetheless, coming to trust this startling revelation with our minds, hearts, and bodies is no simple equation. It requires disciplined learning in which our minds, hearts, and bodies trace and retrace the figure of the gospel story until it is a deep memory in bone and muscle, in will and character. The season of Lent is a time to figure the gospel out, text by text. It holds the promise of awakening a daydreaming church to the wonderfully scandalous good news—that in dying to all of our self-help strategies and techniques we make room for the One who comes to sustain with a Word of mercy and to host at the Welcome Table. Lenten preachers and presiders are called to the joyful work of announcing and enacting this sustaining evangelical truth in pulpit and at table. Thank God that they, too, are promised sustenance by the Risen One who informs, inspires, and indwells the pilgrim church.

Notes

¹ A.A. McArthur, "Lent" in *A Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. J.G. Davies (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1972), 212-215.

² Note the growing movement to adopt the Christian Year as a means of informing the alternative identity of Christian communities (see, for example, "Salt of the Earth 2002-2003 – A Christian Seasons Calendar" at www.thechristiancalendar.com).

³ So at University Hill Congregation we are moving to the weekly celebration of the Eucharist as a communal discipline for the season of Lent.

⁴ Janice Love, minister of Christian Education at University Hill Congregation rightly wonders: "What happens with a hermeneutic like this when the congregation is not doing its part by engaging in a disciplined practice of making room for loss in its dispersed bodies? The hermeneutic then holds the potential of being distorted as comfort in the midst of continued consumptive habits and ways. It makes me wonder about finding ways to encourage folk in those disciplined habits of making room for loss before we move into Lent."

⁵ Long sung only in the Sistine Chapel, Allegri's "Miserere" became widely known when it was transcribed by memory, after a single visit to the Vatican, by the seventeen-year old Mozart.

⁶ William H. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), 31-66.

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Ichabod Toward Home: The Journey of God's Glory* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 119-146.