

Lenten Light: Domestic Violence and Preaching

Mary Donovan Turner

Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, California

Lent typically brings to mind images, symbols, and a “photo album” of memories: standing in line in the middle aisle of the sanctuary and very quietly moving forward through the stillness to have the dark, grainy ashes imposed on the forehead; long days with no nourishment, a fasting that produces a gnawing hunger continually reminding us that we are in a season of sacrifice; a person with knees bent and head bowed pouring out words from a penitent heart and soul; baptismal candidates who are learning about the church, its teachings and practices. They are dressed in white, ready to renounce evil and begin life anew. Our thoughts often turn to ourselves and individuals like us. During Lent we spend time evaluating our lives as we are currently living them and discerning new pathways for the future. It is a time of lament, confession, relinquishment, sacrifice, and repentance, when the sounds around us are in minor key, and we recognize that we have not lived up to the potential that God has planted deep within us. It is a time of realizing that we have thirsty souls longing for a sense of God’s promise and presence and desire for right relationship. For many of us, the sights and sounds of Lent are personal, bound up with the regrets and challenges of our own living.

Isaiah 58:1-12, an Old Testament reading for Ash Wednesday, Year C, invites us to usher in the season with broadened and enhanced understandings. The prophet will not allow us to be content with individualistic and personal, perhaps sentimental, Lenten thinking. As prophets do, Isaiah names the realities of life that he sees around him. He then interprets those realities in light of the people’s relationship and covenantal commitment to their God. He is not satisfied with shallow devotion or empty ritual. Our collection of ritual memories, ashes and fastings, will not, by themselves, suffice.

There is urgency in Isaiah’s soundings. Chapter 58 begins: *Shout out! Do not hold back! Lift up your voice! Announce!* There is no time to waste because the world suffers. The people believe that they are practicing righteousness, a right relationship between God and neighbor. But what the people see about themselves, God does not see. What the people naively and happily assume is that in their living they have drawn close to God. They are mistaken.

God opens the photo album and the same pictures are there—people with the cross of ashes on their foreheads, people fasting with penitent hearts. Isaiah reminds us that God expects more. We cannot allow our Lenten thoughts to be focused only on our own personal, private redemption; we must be intent on public engagement, on mending the world. Our own deliverance is intimately tied to the deliverance of those who share the world with us. We are tied in a garment of mutual destiny.¹

Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself?...Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the

bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? (Isaiah 58: 4-5a, 6-7)

The fast day is not sufficient, the prophet says, when while you are fasting you fight and strike with a wicked fist. Isaiah is concerned with those who engage in religious ritual but who seem oblivious to the fighting and violence in our world. God is not calling for a fast from food, but a fast from injustice and a fast from ignoring those who are without food, clothing, and shelter. He is calling for a fast from hiding, from silence, from an insular, individualistic way of living. The prophet challenges us to replace poverty with care, compassion, and unconditional kindness; injustice with justice; and violence with reconciliation.

The World's Violence

We do not need to recount here all the many and varied ways violence is made manifest in the communities around us. A cursory look at the day's headlines will suffice. We are at war. We may never know how many innocent people have been murdered. Young people are murdered senselessly in our neighborhoods and on city streets. There are gangs that corrupt their members by teaching that violence is the only way. Women and men lose their life savings and retirements because of corrupted officials who eventually bring a company's demise. Hate crimes. Genocide that brings displacement and hunger. Clergy scandals. And with a prevalence hard to acknowledge and believe,² there is violence perpetrated in the home, ideally one's place of safety and comfort, one's resting place. Twelve million women in this country—twenty-five percent of all women—will be abused by an intimate partner. An estimated two million women are assaulted every year.³ Domestic violence, violence that takes place in the home, includes all the harmful acts or willful neglect within a family that result in physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual trauma or injury. These acts can take place against children, women and men.⁴ Isaiah would say to us that these issues must claim our rightful attention if we are to live righteous lives before God and with one another.

This violence is not new to the world of course. Even a casual read through the biblical text will demonstrate that violence between family members and toward women and children is “part and parcel” of the story of our ancestors. Many of these stories embarrass us; they have historically been left out of our lectionaries so that we don't have to deal with the discomforts that reading them inevitably brings. You will not find, for instance, the recounting of the “betrayal, rape, torture, murder and dismemberment of the unnamed woman”⁵ (Judges 19:1-30) in any of years A, B, or C of the *Revised Common Lectionary*.⁶ It is a story that depicts the horror of brutality and female helplessness, abuse, and annihilation. Nor will you find in the common lectionary the story told in II Samuel 13:1-22, a story of a family divided. In it brother violates sister. He is the prince. He has all the prestige and the power that would naturally be accorded someone in his position. She is the princess who takes care of him, but who, in the end, is a victim of unrelieved suffering. This is a story of rape.⁷ The story of Hagar, a woman banished to the wilderness by Abraham, whose child she births, has only recently (in the *Revised Common Lectionary*) made its way into the

weekly lections of liturgical communities. For centuries she was left not only silenced in the desert, but *also* silenced by the neglect of the church who tried to render her story invisible. She is one of the first females in Scripture to experience rejection and abuse.

Not only has the church conspired to silence the stories of these women, but we have inherited Scripture with thorny theological problems as well. Admonitions in the late epistles of the New Testament have stirred and invited control and abuse of women. Directives for wives to submit to their husbands and for men to be the “heads of their households” have both inadvertently and advertently encouraged the abuse of wives, and consequently, other female relatives as well. Thus the church, by preaching and encouraging submission *and* by failing to name and preach the harsh realities of the lives of women who are abused, colludes with the societies that oppress and silence them.

There is another complexity as well. God, in the Old Testament, is sometimes metaphorically depicted as Jerusalem’s husband, a husband ready to abandon and abuse his wife in response to her unfaithfulness. In Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Hosea, though with different language and imagery, each of these prophets paints the portrait of a God who is angry, jealous, and abusive. This God is violence-prone; God’s anger is in charge. In this family drama, Jerusalem, who has been unfaithful, is devastated and destroyed by the enemy. She is shamed and ashamed.

Following these graphic and harsh pictures of abandonment and abuse, the prophets often offer compelling songs of restoration and acceptance where God and community find themselves once again in relationship. God’s love and compassion trumps God’s anger. Yet, this remains a troubling story. It plays out a family drama all too common. The angry husband apologizes and makes a pledge never to be angry again...until next time.

Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed; do not be discouraged, for you will not suffer disgrace; for you will forget the shame of your youth, and the disgrace of your widowhood you will remember no more. For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name; the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called....For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the LORD, your Redeemer. (Isaiah 54:4-8)

We have to ask how these troubling images of God as the abusive husband, one who abandons, punishes and sexually abuses his spouse, have prompted or justified abuse toward women and children in our own world.⁸ One of the most critical theological issues of our time is power and the abuse of power: “It informs our views of God and affects our relationships. Inappropriate and misleading images of divine power have contributed...to the unfortunate misuse of power in human relations.”⁹ We must address the biblical texts that directly or subtly reinforce violence, imbalances, and misuse of power, and speak out against them.

The Challenges for the Preacher

Andre Resner, in the volume entitled *Just Preaching*, says that “Justice is as much

a necessity as breathing is, and a constant occupation” for preachers.¹⁰ He says that “just relations—and systems that promote fairness and equity among all people—are not simply a value of God and of all who would call themselves God’s people; these constitute faith’s supreme value. It is *the* value out of which all other values are to be understood.”¹¹ If we believe what Resner says to be true, then naming the realities of domestic violence in our nation and world rightfully takes its place in our liturgies, our prayers and laments, and in our preaching. Even when we know this to be right, the problem faced by preachers is complicated and demands that preachers think clearly about the issues involved. Virtually all church communities in North America have survivors, victims *and* perpetrators of sexual and domestic violence in their midst. This reality provides both the urgency and the challenge for preaching. Because both perpetrators and victims of domestic violence are likely to be found in our congregations (with or without our awareness), we must ask these questions:

1. Does preaching about domestic violence bring it “out into the open” in a way that will allow honest conversation and the possibility that those who have been living in silence about its realities name their despair and begin a process of healing? Most victims of domestic violence do not go to their pastors. They are ashamed or embarrassed and may fear that their pastors will condemn or even reject them. They may fear that their pastor will encourage them to stay in an abusive relationship because of the church’s historic teaching regarding divorce. They may believe that the male pastor will “side” with the husband.

2. Can we preach about domestic violence without having in place a system and network of care for those who are plagued with memories of their abusive and abused pasts?

3. How does the preacher bring a word that, at the same time, speaks to abused and abuser and that addresses the systemic forces that support abuse?

4. What is the community response to those found guilty of the sexual abuse of children who return, after incarceration, and wish to be reincorporated into the life of the church?

5. Is it ever appropriate for the preacher to name his or her own experiences of abuse while preaching? How do we think about the challenges and cautions that rightfully guide our thinking about the use of first person narrative in preaching?

6. What do we as pastors preach about forgiveness? Have we thought through the complicated issues related to premature, pseudo, and mature forgiveness? Should all acts of violence be forgiven? What cannot be forgiven?¹²

7. How do we as preachers bring a word that will challenge the community to make systemic, political, and communal changes in the world that will lessen incidences of domestic violence? Where do we in the church begin?

8. Are there other places in the programmatic life of the congregation where discussions about domestic violence, sexual abuse of children, etc. could profitably take place, places where participants can join the conversation with their own perceptions, questions, etc.? What are the limitations to addressing issues such as domestic violence from the pulpit, where information sharing is often one-sided?

Lenten Light

Isaiah does not leave us in despair. He names the realities of the community’s practice of shallow allegiance and meaningless ritual. But then, the prophet reminds

us that there is a hopefulness that comes from our renewed commitment to “tell the truths” about ourselves, our world, and our willingness to engage in it: “Then your light shall break forth like the dawn and your healing shall spring up quickly” (Isaiah 58:8a). The lengthening days in springtime embody a Lenten hope: the days get longer, and there is more light to renew and revive us. Isaiah speaks of this light that springs forth and brings healing. This is a communal healing. Interestingly, this Hebrew word from healing comes from a Hebrew word meaning “long” or “lengthen.”¹³ That makes it very appropriate for Lent, which itself means “lengthening,” the season when the days get longer and longer! This is the kind of healing that brings wellness and prolongs life. This is the kind of healing that comes when we realize that the demise of one is our common demise; the oppression of one is the oppression of all. This is a community that takes responsibility and makes a priority of the most vulnerable among them. In this kind of community, healing springs up—quickly.

When the yoke is removed, the blame is shared; when we stop speaking evil and share our food with the hungry, when we acknowledge the needs of the afflicted (vv. 9-10), it is then that the light rises and shines, casting away the pervasive gloom that can enfold and suffocate. The world moves from a parched wilderness to a watered garden; it is like a spring of water that never fails. Those who are the purveyors of this Lenten light receive a new name: “repairers of the breach and the restorer of streets to live in”(58:12).

Lenten Living

We are accustomed as preachers to thinking about our sermons, searching for the right words to say to our communities, awaiting a word that will inform or inspire them. During Lent, we hope to lead them on a journey with Jesus the Christ, the last days of his life themselves a testimony to violence. Perhaps our own Lenten commitments should be to truth telling, so that the rituals of our community and our common worship will not be devoid of substance and divorced from the world’s violent demise.

Notes

1. This metaphor belongs to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and is found in his “Letter From Birmingham Jail,” *Why We Can’t Wait* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

2. The American Medical Association (AMA) says that, conservatively, two million women are assaulted by their partners each year. Yet they admit that the true incidence of partner violence is closer, in all likelihood, to four million per year. Thirty percent of American women report that they have been abused by husband or boyfriend. In addition, the Bureau of Justice Statistics National Crime Victimization Survey in 1996 indicates that women of all races are equally vulnerable to these attacks. Many ministers hold to the myth that domestic violence is found only in certain cultural, racial, or socioeconomic groups. See American Medical Association, “Facts About Family Violence,” at www.ojp.usdof.gov. For Bureau of Justice Statistics National Crime Victimization Survey, see the same.

3. Al Miles, *Domestic Violence: What Every Pastor Needs to Know* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 50.

4. It is difficult to get accurate statistics regarding domestic violence, acts of violence or injury, that take place against men. While there has been some public effort to recognize and name acts of violence against women and children, little has been done in relation to the emotional and physical trauma sustained by men in their family relationships.

5. Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984), 65.

6. See *The Revised Common Lectionary: The Consultation on Common Texts* (Nashville: Abingdon

- Press, 1992), 112-128, for a complete listing of biblical texts included in the three-year lectionary cycle.
7. Tribble, 37.
 8. Mary Donovan Turner, *The God We Seek: Portraits from the Old Testament* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, forthcoming).
 9. Rev. Fritz Fritschel in Miles, 11-12.
 10. Andre Resner, *Just Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003), xxi.
 11. Ibid., xx.
 12. Archie Smith, Jr. and Ursula Riedel-Pfaefflin, "Complexity and Simplicity in Pastoral Care: The Case of Forgiveness" www.psr.edu.
 13. Mary Donovan Turner, *Old Testament Words: Reflections for Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003), 102.

Selected Resources for Ministers: Preaching and Domestic Violence

- Miles, Al. *Domestic Violence: What Every Pastor Needs to Know* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2000).
- McClure, John and Nancy Ramsay, eds. *Telling the Truth: Preaching about Sexual and Domestic Violence* (United Church Press,) March, 1999.
- The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, www.usccb.org. This site gives suggestions for how to see gospel lections through the lens of domestic violence (e.g. 3rd Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year C: Luke 1: 1-4, 4:14 - 21 where Jesus uses the words of Isaiah to announce the purposes of his ministry).