

'Let the Redeemed of the Lord Say So': Receiving the Texts and Living the Faith of the Lenten Season

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Joan Chittister says, "Lent is a call to renew a commitment grown dull, perhaps, by a life more marked by routine than by reflection."¹ By Lent, the newness of the new year has worn off and the commitment of preaching can surely be a practice "more marked by routine than by reflection." Given the relentless pattern of the arrival of Sundays (every 3 or 4 days it seems!), it is tempting for those of us responsible for weekly preaching to see Lent only as a time for a shift in focus, a deeper message about discipleship and spiritual practices, with more reference than in other seasons to the shadow of the cross.

For Lent to be a season saturated with meaning and a journey worth making for those blessed and burdened by listening to us week after week, it must be a season of deep reflection for us as preachers who are also followers of Jesus. This Lent, could our own preparation for preaching become a time of profound self-examination and an inward pilgrimage? Could our sermon preparation become truly a Lenten discipline? Could we find opportunity for being awakened to our own mortality and our own need for redemption?

As preachers we often determine that we will keep to a division between our own spiritual practice and our encounter with the Biblical text for the purposes of preaching and teaching. We also distinguish between our ability to worship (which is usually when we are in someone else's church) and leading worship, which we call "work." I'm starting to wonder, however, if we can't worship and work at the same time, how can we expect people in our congregations to see their vocations as teachers, lawyers, parents, and engineers as acts of worship? And isn't this what we hope for—that those we lead in worship and counsel in our studies and whose children we baptize will see all of life as a "continual thank-offering to [God]."²

I am not talking about merging our own spiritual lives with our congregations. I am not talking about overloading sermons with self-referential tidbits or burdening congregations with our unresolved neuroses or flailing doubts. I'm talking about being reminded that the texts we study are addressed first to *us* as people of faith and then, through the presence and work of the Spirit, to others we have the privilege of speaking to week after week. I am suggesting that we let our own struggles, fears, and doubts enter the room in which we prepare to preach and drive us into deeper interaction with the text and perhaps even deeper connection with God. As preachers and pastors, biblical texts can too easily become "tools of the trade" that we use "on" others (even if we aren't using them as weapons).

As an exercise in Lenten self-examination, perhaps this is a season to ask for feedback on your preaching. How are hearers reflecting on the sermons they listen to throughout Lent? This is a wonderful opportunity to receive gifts of the spirit from the congregation(s) with whom you share worship. I find myself awed at times, when I am privileged to hear how something that came out of my mouth on a particular Sunday reverberated in the life of a particular person or family. I am humbled at other

times, when I realize a message that *surely* came across loud and clear is still floating around, seemingly disembodied, yet to become incarnate.

Lent 1: Being reminded of the future.

In this first week in Lent, we ask to know the ways of God (Psalm 25:4). We profess a desire to be led in God's truth (v.5), and we pledge to "wait all day long (v.5)." We admit, as we enter this season, to "troubles of [the] heart" (v.17), which we had perhaps hoped to keep hidden. To trust in the steadfast love of God celebrated in Psalm 25 is to be reminded that we have been held, are held, and will be held in the strong and gentle care of God. We have a future with God. We step onto a path, a pilgrimage that is Lent.

I hear rushing water. It is at first frightening water, the water flooding the earth as God washes away everything and everyone in a heartbroken act of violence in hopes of starting over with a creation God called "good." I think of how hard we as pastors work to respond to tragedy by assuring people that God did not "cause" the flood that washed away their beloved grandchild this summer, nor was God punishing your sister whose house burned to the ground in central Texas. And yet we are asked to grapple with a text like Genesis 9, in which God makes a covenant with the earth through a pledge of nonviolence, hanging God's weapon of war (the bow) in the clouds in a gesture of peace. Noah, his family, and two of every creature come through the flood, joyful no doubt to be alive and part of a new relationship with God. Thankful for God's covenant and rejoicing in God's salvation, Noah et. al must have still been haunted by the death and destruction they saw in those churning waters, and you have to wonder if they were plagued by "survivor guilt" in the dark of the night. Being "saved through water" (see 1 Peter passage) is glorious and traumatizing.

Jesus emerges from the Jordan river, after being baptized along with those seeking to be drenched in forgiveness, who followed John the Baptist out into the wilderness. As Jesus surfaces, he sees the heavens "torn apart" to make way for a dove-like Holy Spirit to come toward him like a meteorite piercing the atmosphere, accelerating toward earth in the grip of gravity. I remember in seminary we referred to the Markan version of this scene as the "dive-bombing dove." As Noah and family learn of their place in God's covenant through the 40 days and nights of sea sickening travel in an ark, Jesus appears to learn of his identity as beloved child of God through the voice of a God who then *immediately* drives him into the wilderness for a parallel 40-day ordeal encountering Satan and wild beasts.

The bow in the clouds, the proclamation of Jesus' identity, and the waters of baptism referenced in the Mark and 1 Peter passages serve as reminders of what the future holds for us in our relationship with God. In each, God defines a relationship that drives us into a tumultuous, yet blessed future as children of God, as subjects of God's steadfast love, as bearers of God's presence in the world. Given the turmoil of these days, economically and politically here and around the world, to be reminded of this future is to walk in a freedom and fearlessness that is not gained by following the prognosticators of the day.

Lent 2: Personal redemption and the renewal of the world

The psalm portion for this Sunday is the last section of the Psalm that Jesus begins to speak from the cross. Psalm 22 begins with the cry of abandonment "My God, my

God, why have you forsaken me?" and concludes in a celebration and gratitude for God's response to this cry of desolation. The personal celebration of God's gracious response to the psalmist's agony is woven in with echoes of the covenant with Abraham. The psalmist imagines the fulfillment of the covenant given in Genesis 17 by proclaiming, "All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him" (v. 27). The psalmist's experience of personal redemption is thus projected on a larger screen encompassing the past, present, and future of human experience with this covenanting, redeeming God. I am reminded here of Mary's audacious words in the Magnificat in which something very similar happens. Mary's experience of being a pregnant woman becomes part of the cosmic story of the Creator's redeeming love at work in the world: "Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed....God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly....God has helped [the] servant Israel, in remembrance of God's mercy, according to the promise God made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever" (Luke 2:48,52,54, 55).

Paul interprets Abram's faith generously when he says in his Romans commentary on this story, "[Abraham] did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead ..., or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb" (Romans 4:19). And get this: "No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God..."(v.20). Ummm...really? Paul may have mislaid his copy of Genesis and conveniently forgotten the "Hagar and Ishmael" affair, among other instances of wavering trust on Abram's part, between the initial promise of God in Genesis chapter 12 and the "reset" covenant promise we approach this Sunday in chapter 17. Paul's willingness to see the best in our spiritual ancestor Abraham gives us encouragement that perhaps those of future generations who reflect on our lives may see fit to highlight the "good bits."

In Mark 8, embedded in Jesus' first passion prediction, we have a call to discipleship. As Abraham's call becomes the blessing for generations, Jesus' life becomes the path for those who follow him. We see Peter reflecting the disciples' and our own resistance to a costly journey in the shadow of a cross. Brian K. Blount and Gary W. Charles write that "to 'take up your cross' is a call ...to public ministry that confronts whatever powers prevent the saving work of God."³ To take up one's cross is "not to endure stoically the burdens of life but rather to set oneself on the same trajectory of Jesus, thus to 'follow me [Jesus].'"⁴

I asked a group of women I have the privilege to meet with each week who are incarcerated for federal crimes to reflect with me on this passage. One woman wondered out loud why Jesus thought anyone at all would follow him when he put it in such harsh terms. It occurred to us then to be quite shocked that there was anyone who hung around long enough to become his follower, let alone still be repeating his call to discipleship two thousand years later. For the women I meet with, the harsh, either/or tone of Jesus' words don't seem to phase them a bit, however. For many, their lives have been so absorbed in violence and/or the curse of drugs and drug dealing that this is their first opportunity to have sobriety and quiet. They often become haunted by their own actions and seized with an overwhelming desire to change, or more accurately, to *be* changed by God. It makes complete sense to someone caught in the prison of addiction that the choice is either to focus on divine things or human things, to lose life through trying to save it (get a fix, secure power, etc.) or save it

through losing it.

This might be the week for us as preachers to retell ourselves our own journey of faith in the silence of our own studies, to remember our own cries to God, our own experiences of renewal and redemption, and our own reluctance to relinquish life for our true life to emerge.

As we imagine a sermon, is there a cry of agony to be revealed? Is there a moment of redemption to be shared? I cling faithfully to the advice of my first preaching professor Wade P. Huie to never make myself the hero of my own story. I also trust the wisdom of my 16 year old daughter who helped me prepare to be the keynote speaker at a presbytery youth conference by advising, "Mom, the kids need to know that this means something to *you*." That turned out to be all I needed.

These passages may challenge us in our spiritual journey as preachers also to be cautious about how the state of our own spiritual health impacts our proclamation to a community of faith. Aware as we are of how others' states of mind and heart influence their perception of the world and their behavior toward others, we have an opportunity here to be cautioned not to project our own unexamined states onto the canvas of history.

Lent 3

The ordinances of the Lord are true
and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb. (Psalm 19:9-10)

As Protestants, we seem saturated in the false dichotomy of grace vs. law. We are invited by Psalm 19 to view the law of God as sweetness and fulfillment of a deep desire for the treasure that is God. What a change for those of us who were weaned on tirades against the "legalism" of the Pharisees, Roman Catholicism, or even "Evangelical Christians." Paul of course has spurred us on in this, but probably only because we lost sight that he was trying to bring Jews and Gentiles together in a new community where all were on equal terms, not to flush all of Hebrew Scripture down the drain.

In Exodus we are introduced to the law as a gift of freedom, a gift to those who have lived under the law of Pharaoh for hundreds of years, a law that served to feed the power and purse of a leader who had no concern for the flourishing of the Hebrew people. This law, these new commandments which are communicated in the wilderness, are to give shape and form to a community, that they may reflect God in the world and live in faithful relationship with one another. If we discount "the law" as a list of silly rules and regulations (as I have heard people do), we inadvertently suggest that our relationship with God is only an individual matter rather than a community enterprise. We suggest that behavior toward one another has no significance and that we have no measure of morality or righteousness. On the other hand, to act as if no adaptation is required or new understandings are relevant as we interpret the law, we are not using the gifts of the Spirit we celebrate at Pentecost.

Calvin, in his "Institutes," suggests that the commandments in Exodus 20 that

begin with “Thou shalt not” not only tell us what not to do, but they suggest, even compel us, to do their opposite.⁵ So the commandment not to steal translates into an exhortation to generosity; the commandment to not kill becomes a call to nourish life.

When we read and discussed the Ten Commandments together in the prison Bible study, one woman talked about her two young children visiting her. They surprised her by performing a version of the Ten Commandments in song and dance that they had learned at the church they were attending with the relative that was caring for them. When they got midway through the performance, they asked their mom, “What comes next, Mom?” She said to us with a tinge of shame, “I didn’t know what came next.” The children finished off the song, and this mother, who is riddled with guilt over what she has and is putting her beloved children through, said she understood at that moment that the law of God was as sweet as honey.

In John, the “cleansing of the temple” scene takes place right after Jesus’ first sign: the changing of water into wine at the wedding at Cana. The Temple was gone by the time the gospel of John and most likely all three of the others were written. If the Temple was meant to be the eternal dwelling place of God, the sign of stability, the endurance of a tradition, Jewish faith would need to restructure itself in light of its destruction. Inasmuch as the readers/hearers of John’s gospel were living in the aftermath of this destruction, this story contributes to the shaping of one community’s response to this event: the argument that Jesus himself takes the place of the temple.

This act of Jesus need not be seen as pitting the early Christian believers against the Jewish tradition as a whole. It is an act reminiscent of the prophets who often railed against religious ritual and sacrifices, when they were attempts to mask or distract from justice for the poor, or when they were flowery words paired with evil action (see Jeremiah 7:4 in which he blasts the people for saying, “The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord” while carrying out evil deeds).

Religious pronouncements, the speaking of religious words or prayers, can either spur faithful response or be a substitute *for* faithful response. Those of us who make a living crafting religious phrases and meanings may be especially vulnerable to this form of sin. If we spend the day thinking religious thoughts and talking about religious things, do we let ourselves off the hook of living the religious lives we seek to encourage members of our congregations to live? People make the very generous assumption that because I talk about prayer, generosity, social justice, and biblical faithfulness, that these things are solidly present in my own life. It is seductive, not to mention convenient, to let them think this. Again to emphasize the significance of Lent for us as preachers, we can pause for significant reflection on whether the structures of meaning we are attempting to build in the lives of others apply equally to our own. Do we proclaim the “foolishness of Christ crucified” (1 Corinthians 1:18-25) with our lives as well as our words?

Lent 4: Let the Redeemed of the Lord say so.

Psalms 107 begins Book 5, the last book of Psalms. The Psalmist begins with a summons to listeners: “Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, those God redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands...” (v. 2-3). Who are the redeemed who are called to witness to the restorative power of God? Those who “wandered in desert

wastes" (v.4), those who "sat in darkness and in gloom, prisoners in misery and in irons"(v.10), those who "were sick through their sinful ways" (v.17). In each case a cry is made to God and God "saved them from their distress" or "delivered them from destruction...." At moments the psalm seems to touch the experience of the Israelites as they journey through the desert and into the promised land, but the allusions are subtle and the breadth and depth of all of human experience seem to be addressed.

Johanna Van Wijk-Box points out that the boring name of the book of Numbers alone does a lot to make sure the book is "assigned to obscurity and neglect."⁶ The tales in Numbers are far from boring, however. The book does a good job creating a sense of anxiety in the listener/hearer as we witness a pattern of the people of Israel complaining in the wilderness and being punished by God. Trust is eroding, obedience to God is rare, and Moses' leadership is under threat. Alienation and hostility between God and humanity begins to pulse through the narrative. Psalm 107 could well be a response to the complainers in the wilderness, prodding them to recognize the work of God to bring them out of danger, starvation, and illness.

In Numbers 21 the complaining has reached fever pitch. They lash out at Moses and God with words that don't even make sense: "For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food"(21:5). So, is there food or not, guys? Make up your mind! The people do not recognize their own ingratitude until poisonous serpents bite and kill some among them. When they confess their sin, Moses is instructed to construct a bronze serpent and lift it on a pole. When those bitten by a serpent look at it, they live. In this week's passage in John 3, Jesus presents himself as the Son of Man who will be lifted up as the serpent was by Moses, and those who see him will "believe" and experience the wholeness even more life-giving than the healing serpent: eternal life.

In a discussion about the Numbers passage with the women in jail, they identified immediately with the Israelites' tendency toward ingratitude and grumbling. One commented that incarceration brings a sense of gratitude for the simplest gifts of life, especially those that are not available to them. Gratitude for children is first and foremost as mothers long for the opportunity to be at their son or daughter's birthday party. In experiencing communion with homemade bread, laughter broke out into the silence as several women were surprised by the wonderful taste of the bread.

Several participants pointed to the symbolism of the raised serpent as meaningful wisdom about healing. Being arrested and jailed leaves plenty of time for reviewing one's life. Lack of access to drugs gives some of these women the clearest thinking they have had in a long time. They are at a crossroads and have the choice to look seriously at what brought them to this place and to confront it. In the group they were clear: "We have to face ourselves and what we have done to be healed." The tragedy is most of these women will not receive adequate resources and support to stay out of jail once they have left.

We as preachers often pride ourselves on holding to a fairly nuanced theology and struggle with words like these from Ephesians 2:1: "You were dead in your trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient." In this week's John passage, we have the clear distinction between light and darkness: "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil "(John 3:19).

In a Bible study at my church, folks would be disturbed by this dualism and clarity of distinguishing between good and evil. In the Bible study in the jail, these images speak powerfully to the experience of the women I meet. They quickly name good and evil, light and darkness, and enthusiastically pray to a God who draws people out of darkness and sin into marvelous light. Their willingness to enter into this clear distinction makes me reflect on what darkness might be engulfing our lives out of which we need to be drawn.

Lent 5: A heart transformed

Psalms 51 is the Psalm for the day, echoing the beginning of Lent with its characteristic use on Ash Wednesday. This penitential psalm, associated with the narrative of David's revealing encounter with the prophet Nathan, encourages us to consider our deep need for transformation. This is not a psalm about tweaking a few faults around the edges of our lives, but opening to a full change in the structure of our life's DNA. Many of us in church would be hard pressed to allow ourselves to dive into the deep cleansing waters alluded to in this text. It may be that this psalm is for us, most of the time, an exercise in hearing or mouthing words that so clearly apply to others: those blinded by greed, seduced by power, distracted by lust.

Yet, thanks to the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit in the reading and hearing of scripture, Psalm 51 may find us at just the right time, and if we had not been introduced to this text, sung this text, heard this text when we didn't need it, it wouldn't be there to teach us what it means for life to be restored by a merciful God when we *do need it*. And there is no doubt, if we haven't needed it yet, we will need it someday.

Jeremiah 31:31-34 anticipates with hope the kind of whole-life transformation articulated in Psalm 51. It proclaims a new covenant, a day when the ways of God will be inscribed in the genetic structure of human life (written on the heart), or to use another image derived from contemporary science, new pathways created in the brain. God's brain, it seems, will be reprogrammed as well, to "remember their sin no more" (31:34).

Perhaps the image of Christ as high priest in Hebrews, so potentially off-putting to Protestants, is exactly what we need to respond to the invitations of Psalm 51 and Jeremiah 31. This high priest is not an image of cold power, but one who "sympathizes with our weaknesses" (see Hebrews 4:15) and who is "able to deal gently with the ignorant and the wayward" (5:1). This high priest joins his human life with ours and leads us through the transformation that leads to obedience. Rather than being a stoic functionary, this priest, "in the days of his flesh, . . . offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears" (5:7).

This passage in Hebrews gives those of us who preach and pastor an important opportunity to reflect on our role in a community. There are many experiences in pastoral ministry or chaplaincy which can nudge us, perhaps unknowingly, into a sense of being far too set apart from the people we serve. We can become tender from criticism, cynical from encountering apathy, frustrated by those who show little interest in growing in faith and knowledge. Some people cope with these experiences by adopting a "prophetic outsider" persona, feeling compelled to manage, correct, or guide congregations from "above." It feels safer here and allows us to exempt ourselves from complicity in the dysfunction or lack of vitality we see around us. If we consider the image of Christ as high priest, we become part of the congregation

that looks to the high priest. We are invited to be the one who gestures toward Christ (rather than the one who stands in for Christ), all the while watching and listening for the ways our fellow pilgrims gesture with their lives and hearts toward the same high priest. We might point out the path, but it will be a path that we are clearly on as well, rather than a journey we are perceived as having completed. In standing with those we serve, and in listening for insights from them, we are likely to be humbled by the richness of the faith that is all around us.

This week's passage in John finds Jesus in Jerusalem and the forces of death hovering closer and closer. Jesus declares that "the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (12:23). This theme of crucifixion as glorification is characteristic of John's gospel, along with the understanding of Jesus as the one who comes down from heaven and will return to heaven. In this passage, John's Jesus will say that in this act of being "glorified," he will "draw all people to myself." In a rare echo of the synoptics, Jesus says, "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (12:25), which serves as a call to discipleship in the midst of the turmoil that is Jesus' last days.

In Mark and Matthew Jesus asks for the cup of suffering to be removed from him during the scene of agony in the garden. Though scholars wonder how much, if any, access the writer of John had to the synoptic traditions, there must have been an awareness of this garden tradition and a desire to dispute it. "John actually portrays Jesus in the act of considering whether he should make this prayer or not and then deciding not to"⁷ when Jesus says in 12:27, "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – 'Father save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour." In John Jesus creates and follows a trajectory that brings to those who trace it with him eternal life, but confounds those who are wrapped in darkness. To grapple with this passage on the Sunday prior to Palm/Passion Sunday gives us the opportunity to ponder whether we will follow this path with our lives and actions, when we know what Good Friday means.

Notes

1. Joan Chittister, *The Liturgical Year: The Spiraling Adventure of the Spiritual Life* (Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 111.
2. *The Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 157.
3. Brian K. Blount and Gary W. Charles, *Preaching Mark in Two Voices* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002), 149.
4. Ibid, 148.
5. John T. McNeill, Ed. *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960).
6. Johanna W. H. van Wijk-Boss, *Making Wise the Simple: The Torah in Christian Faith and Practice* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 170.
7. John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 489.