

SERMON

STARTERS

Gilbert H. Caldwell

THE LENTEN JOURNEY

The fourth chapter of Luke begins by describing the journey of Jesus into the desert where he spent those crucial 40 days. As we begin our Lenten journey, I am reminded of personal journeys that have shaped me in ways that I will not forget. As a now 70-year-old, I still remember those times in the 1940s and 1950s when my Methodist preacher-father would find out at annual conference that he was to move. Our family would begin the packing and praying and then travel: from Winston-Salem, North Carolina, to Dallas, Galveston, Austin, Texas, Orangeburg, South Carolina, and finally back home to Greensboro, North Carolina, at different times to respond to my father's new appointment.

The Luke passage speaks of Jesus making his journey with "the power of the Holy Spirit." So it was with the Caldwell family in those days of racial segregation. Public accommodations were not available to us; therefore, at nightfall we would drive into a town, find out where the Methodist preacher lived, and ask to stay overnight. Always the answer was yes, whether my father was known or not.

It is this kind of faith and hope nurtured by the Holy Spirit that I know will characterize the Lenten preaching of United Methodist preachers this year. We do not allow any memory, experience, or present difficulty to "separate us from the love of God as expressed in Jesus Christ." The pulpit is not a platform to articulate residual bitterness; rather it is the place to proclaim the God of the "Nevertheless." My Sermon Starters will not be "mini-sermons" but thoughts shaped by prayer and preparation that hopefully will encourage the reader to access the richness of the moving of the Spirit within her or him. I, much as the improvisational jazz musician, will play my "notes," knowing that your notes will be far more profound and impactful than any I could ever "play."

Remember, "...the power of the Holy Spirit was with him, and the Spirit led him into the desert." So may it be with you.

February 29, 2004

1st Sunday in Lent

Deut. 26:1-11, Ps. 91:1-2, 9-16

Rom. 10:8b-13, Lk. 4:1-13

The Promises of God

Deut 26:1-11: Moses reminds the people/Israel, God is giving you the land, they are responsible for harvesting and the first things they pick are to be taken to the places where God is worshiped as an act of thanksgiving to the God who promised and fulfilled the promise by giving the land. Verse 11 speaks of family eating a meal at the place of worship, thanking God "remembering to invite the Levites and the foreigners who live in your town," I first experienced the power of this celebration of harvest in Bethany UMC in Brooklyn, New York, in a church with many members from the nations of the Caribbean, who brought this wonderful observance to that church.

The Lenten journey with its wilderness moments is possible and is renewing as we remember the promises of God.

Psalms 91, reminds us that ours is a God who is a "Fortress" who keeps us safe amidst external (and internal) danger. But, the Psalmist tells us that to truly know this kind of God, we must love and know God. The Lenten season is made renewing and rewarding as we deepen our relationship with a God who not only promises, but also is a source of spiritual protection, no matter what. It is not that God is a "big brother/sister" who intervenes, but One who is present in those moments when we feel alone, frightened, and in deep physical and/or emotional pain.

The passage from Romans is not a declaration of universal salvation, but rather it is Paul's way of saying that God's saving power is available to those who have faith and are willing to accept the generosity of God as offered in Jesus Christ.

There are many of us in ministry who each Sunday remember the words of theologian, Karl Barth; "The Christian lives with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other." We believe that a fail-

ure to "remember the world" in our preaching suggests that the preacher does not believe that "God is able" to be present with us amidst the most difficult of the world's realities. Of course no person of faith dares "go there."

Lent, 2004, regardless of our political perspectives, gives us a special opportunity to proclaim that the God of the Word is also the God of the world.

March 7, 2004

2nd Sunday in Lent

Gen. 15:1-12, 17-18; Ps. 27

Phil. 3:17-4:1; Lk. 13:31-35

Promises: No Deposit No Return

Text: "Later the Lord spoke to Abram in a vision, 'Abram, don't be afraid! I will protect you and reward you greatly.'"

Genesis 15:1 (CEV)

Our reading from Genesis puts us in the middle of a conversation between God and Abram. We read of the two promises God made to Abram. First there is the promise that Abram will have a son to whom he may leave as a legacy his possessions. Secondly there is the promise that the descendants of Abram will be given land.

Observers of Lent are challenged to recognize God's promises that are available to them during the Lenten Journey. From generation to generation those who have taken seriously their observances during this period of spiritual activity are able to convey to any who will listen that they with Abram have received the promises of God. I remember my initial confusion as I heard in some of the churches of my boyhood, "God may not come when you want God, but God always comes on time." I did not quite grasp the simple profundity of this statement that I dismissed. But then in my teenage years as I wrestled with what I began to realize was a "call" to ministry, the promises of God became

personal and real. I then understood, "They that wait upon the Lord will..." I, now, with all of you am unable to count the times "promise" became reality.

Our reading from Philippians reminds us of the necessity for a response once we accept the promises of God. Once grocery stores told us that if we made no deposit on the bottles of soda we purchased, there would be no return.

The second Sunday in Lent prompts us to evaluate the quality and quantity of our disciplined responses to the devotional opportunities for prayer, worship, study and service that are available to us. How intentional and intense has our prayer life been? What about our encounters with scripture? Has corporate and personal worship touched us in ways and in places different from previous experiences? Have we dared allow our faith journey to interpret and interact with a world that needs healing?

There is "promise" for us that we have sometimes not claimed nor believed. Are United Methodists able to ask of ourselves have we "claimed" the blessings (promises) that are ours? Sometimes we are so fearful of being or sounding like

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our sisters and brothers of other faith traditions, that we "pass by on the other side" and then wonder where is our spiritual power?

Philippians 4:1b speaks to us as it spoke to the church at Philippi, "Please keep on being faithful to the Lord. You are my pride and joy."

Promises are there, are our deposits there also?

**March 14, 2004
3rd Sunday in Lent**

Isa. 55:1-9; 1 Cor. 10:1-13
Lk. 13:1-9; Ps. 63:1-8

Planting and Growing

Some of us believe that we who preach, while respecting research and scholarship, are not adverse to using stories and illustrations that some dismiss as being simplistic. ("Scholars" fearful of "connecting" through basic story telling might need to re-evaluate their scholarship.)

My preacher-father told this story in church after church. A young working as usual at this task on the farm, looked up one day and saw a cloud formation that created the letters GPC. He understood this as communication from God indicating he was to leave the farm and "Go preach Christ." He prepared his sermons, volunteered to preach in a very small church without a preacher, and invited an old preacher friend-mentor to hear his sermons. After hearing three of the young man's sermons, his old preacher friend took him aside and said, "I think that cloud formation GPC was really telling you to "Go plant corn".

The Gospel lesson from Luke for this Sunday tells of a conversation Jesus had with a gardener about his unproductive fig tree. Jesus suggests that he chop it down. The gardener responds by saying, "I'll dig around it and put some manure on it to make it grow."

Lent gives us the opportunity to give more attention to that in our lives that has been unproductive. Unproductivity expresses itself in a myriad of ways. The call for introspection and honesty about ourselves that is available to us during this season offers the potential of spiritual deepening and personal liberation. We "grow" in proportion to the attention we give our spiritual selves.

It is during these days of spiritual wilderness wandering that we encounter a God in Christ who as the Psalmist says is like "a stream in a scorching desert."

The biography of the One whom we claim is "head of the church" was nourished and nurtured as a young boy as he listened to and spoke to his elders in the synagogue, his moments with disciples, as a teacher of the multitudes and his 40 days in the wilderness, all served to enrich his journey.

What are we planting and what are we using for fertilizer?

**March 21, 2004
4th Sunday in Lent**

Josh. 5:9-12, Ps. 32; 2 Cor. 5:16-21
Lk. 15:1-3, 11b-32

From Slavery to Freedom

Have we dared admit that despite our satisfactions and accomplishments, we can be enslaved and in need of freedom? The liberation and thus the freedom available to us in what God has done, is doing, and will do in Jesus Christ is beyond belief. Yet each Sunday the preacher has an opportunity to give public witness to her/his journey to freedom.

The reading from the Gospel of Luke is that familiar story of a younger son who left home in a search from freedom only to discover that he had left the loving freedom of his father. He received his inheritance that he requested only to use it in ways that imprisoned him because of his own excesses. He became hungry in a time of famine; he secured a job taking care of pigs and his desire for food made him envious of the food the pigs were eating.

He returned to a father who took the time to explain to his pouting older son, "Your brother was dead, but now he is alive. He was lost and has now been found." (CEV)

Lent 2004 is an opportunity to confront those portions of our lives that stand in the way of our gaining the freedom that comes from saying "yes" to Christ.

Last year we read and heard of a well-known public figure that had been vigorous in his call for higher ethical standards in his *Book of Virtues*. We learned that William Bennett had a gambling habit that was excessive, even though he

claimed his income enabled him to gamble as he did. He is to be commended for his response. He made no effort at "cover-up" and decided to eliminate this habit because it served to contradict his words. None of us are as free as we think we are and we learn of our enslavement in a variety of ways.

There is great wisdom in the saying; "Every time I point a finger (of judgment) at others, I am pointing three at myself."

The Apostle Paul spoke for all of us as he spoke about himself, "The good I ought do, I do not, that I ought not do I do." (A paraphrase of the scripture.)

The spiritual says of Joshua, "Joshua fit (fought) the battle of Jericho and the walls came tumblin' down."

There is a bit of the younger brother (prodigal son), a bit of the older brother who may have been "doing the right thing for the wrong reason" (staying at home), and a bit of William Bennett in all of us. May the discovery of the realities of our own slavery, be transformed by the freedom that is ours in Jesus Christ.

March 28, 2004 5th Sunday in Lent

Isa. 43:16-21; Phil. 3:4b-14

Ps. 126; Jn. 12:1-8

Rain, Sunshine, Rainbow

It is my unscientific understanding that rainbows occur with the right mix of rain and sunshine. (I am sure that I am the only one who was exposed to the myth that when there is rain with sunshine, "the devil is beating his wife.") Life, individually and collectively is a mix of rain and sunshine.

Have we become living rainbows in our witnessing and service? The Psalmist, in Psalm 126, speaks of celebrating the harvest this way, "We cried on our way to plant our seeds, but we will celebrate and shout as we bring in the crops."

Tears often represent our personal "rain." Many of us are afraid of tears. Our "sense of self" can be so fragile that crying represents inner vulnerability and weakness. We dare not cry in the presence of others, certainly not within the church community.

As we begin to see Easter at the end of the Lenten Journey, may our tears be a pre-

lude to the celebrating and shouting that will be ours on Easter Sunday as we sing and say Hallelujah! May our "harvest" be deepened by our understanding of who we are in relation to the God of this season and all seasons.

The Gospel lesson from John paints a picture of that house containing Jesus, Martha, Lazarus, Mary, and Judas. The smell of the perfume that Mary has poured over the feet of Jesus is in the air. We read of a Jesus who affirms the different roles being played by Martha and Mary that day. He tells the money-focused, soon-to-be-betrayer, Judas, there are matters of substance much more important than money.

One manifestation of the uniqueness of Jesus is his capacity to be present with and understand different persons and personalities. In this case, Mary and Martha. His conversation with Judas becomes a teaching moment even as he is aware of his negative spirit and motives

May we, as followers of Jesus who have been transformed by the Christ who lives, learn from our stress and strain, our joy and jubilation in ways that we become "living rainbows" for all to see.

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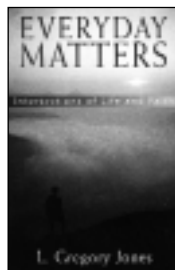
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April 4, 2004 Passion/Palm Sunday

Lk. 19:28-40; Ps. 118:1-2, 19-29
Isa. 50:4-9a; Ps. 31:9-16; Phil. 2:5-11
Lk. 22:14-23:56 or Lk. 23:1-49

The Triumphant Entry

Today's sermon is always a challenge because as we remember the waving of palm branches when Jesus entered Jerusalem and as we wave our branches today, we know this day commemorates "The Week That Was." (Those who are as old as I am may remember a television program that had that title.) The rhythms of this week—joy, celebration, the knowledge that some who celebrate the "entry" wish that it had been more regal. Others who celebrate now will later betray their hosannas by calling for the crucifixion of Jesus, followed by the crucifixion of Good Friday. But, then there will be the glorious celebration of next Sunday, Easter. All represent the mountain and valley experiences of our own lives.

A clergy colleague introduced me to the wonderfully insightful writing of Lavon Bayler, the Association Minister of the Fox Valley Association of the Illinois Conference of the United Church. In her book, *Gathered by Love, Worship Resources for Year C*, The Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, 2001 she shares prayers that capture the power of the scripture readings for this Sunday. Allow them to shape our thinking for our Passion/Palm Sunday sermon preparation, even as our scripture readings may differ: "This is a day of celebration. There is joy in the air. We have witnessed the transforming power of Jesus' compassion. But there are ominous overtones. Come, all who are waving branches to welcome the Savior... We prefer safety, security, and certainty. Then Jesus comes, riding on a donkey, reaching out to outsiders, proclaiming humble obedience as a virtue, challenging powerful people to change their ways... When Christ upsets our craving for stability, we turn away from the risks"... As I read these words, all I could say was whew!

Psalms 118: The theme of this Psalm is "The Lord is Always Merciful." I am particularly drawn to verse 22; "The stone that the builders tossed aside has now become the most important stone." Passion/Palm Sunday prepares us for the week when Jesus was acclaimed, rejected, brutalized then resurrected. It is because of these ups and downs he was able to become "...the most important stone."

An interesting calendar coincidence is that April 4, 1968 Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. The Palm Sunday preacher in 2004 has an opportunity to say that regardless of our perspectives or politics, the nation and the world are better because he lived and witnessed. Some of us will never forget the pain and anger that so many felt on Palm Sunday of 1968. We who preached on that Sunday sought to affirm the fact that the Jesus of Holy Week was the Jesus who inspired Dr. King and so many persons of all races and regions.

April 11, 2004 Easter Day

Acts 10:34-43; Ps. 118 1-2, 14-24
1 Cor 15:19-26, Jn 20:1-18
or Lk 24:1-12

Celebration

"The stone that the builders tossed aside has now become the most important stone. The Lord has done this, and it is amazing to us. This day belongs to the Lord! Let's celebrate and be glad today." Psalm 118: 22-24 (CEV)

The Psalmist is again expressing deep appreciation for God's mercy, strength and power that are available to those who have faith and who believe in God. The 27th verse continues the celebratory theme with the words, "The Lord is our God, and he has given us light! Start the celebration! March with palm branches all the way to the altar."

I initially thought of suggesting as a title for Easter Sunday; "Celebration without Investigation or Debate." We seem to be in a period of some debate and even denunciation of the words some use to explain and interpret the resurrection of Jesus. But Easter is not for debate nor investigation, but rather a time of celebration. Celebration of the magnificent, marvelous, and majestic thing that God has done in and through the life and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Some of us have regular family reunions. We come together to remember, reflect, and re-dedicate ourselves to the family legacy and to the best we have seen in each other. Last November 30th, Grace and I celebrated our 45th wedding anniversary. We remembered the joys, struggles, and mountains we have climbed together. Family reunions and wedding anniversaries are not times for debate and investigation—they are times to celebrate our life together.

One of my preacher-mentors once said to me, "Gil I do not worry too much about

the things in Scripture that I do not yet understand. I worry about the things I do understand." Christians celebrate Easter because of our appreciation and affirmation of the impact the resurrected Christ has had upon the world and us. No life or death has affected, transformed, and empowered persons to the degree Jesus has. Easter, much like love is to be embraced, celebrated, and gives witness to, rather than analyze.

Luke tells us "Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and some other women were the ones who had gone to the tomb." (Luke 24: 9, 10) They were the ones who reported the empty tomb to the 11 disciples. The women had prepared sweet-smelling spices for the dead body of Jesus, but when they arrived on that long-ago morning, he was not there. They then became the first "story tellers" of the story we remember and celebrate on Easter. (How strange it is to some of us that others of us have difficulty accepting the equality of women in the pulpit and sometimes in the pew), after reading their role in telling others about the Christ who was not there, but in time proved to be everywhere.

The Easter "preacher" in her/his preparation may want to find ways to say, "We are an Easter people living in a Good Friday world." "Celebration for the Christian is an inside/out experience, rather than an out/inside experience." Duke Ellington, the great jazz composer/musician who has a hymn in our *UM Hymnal* ("Come Sunday"), is reported to have described jazz this way: "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing."

The preacher's awesome task on Easter is to publicly claim how the new rhythm that affirmation/acceptance of the risen Christ shapes their Easter "Celebration," and to help listeners celebrate the living Christ that is within them. □

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Gilbert H. Caldwell has been minister of four predominantly African American congregations and four predominantly White United



Methodist congregations. He has served as Assoc. Gen. Secretary of the General Commission on Religion and Race. He is a member of the Board of Trustees of Iliff School of Theology in Denver where he lives in retirement.