



# PREACHING GOD'S COMPASSION

LEROY H. ADEN  
AND  
ROBERT G. HUGHES

**P**reachers need to be intentional about shaping the message with theological and pastoral content, but finally what makes preaching pastoral is the impact of the sermon on the listener, whether “intended by the preacher or supplied by the hearers.”<sup>1</sup> Beyond the particular intent, the sermon may function to heal hurts in the lives of listeners. This functional definition of pastoral preaching helps us to think concretely about its major goals or objectives.

**1** Giving voice to human lament. Suffering often reduces afflicted ones to silence. Sermons that verbalize feelings, for example, of protest and anger at seemingly unfair and unjust suffering, even anger at God, may serve the pastoral function of assisting sufferers to acknowledge and work through negative feelings. The psalms of lament in the Old Testament have functioned this way for generations of believers.

**2** Assisting listeners to face reality. Helping persons to make sense of life is a primary goal of pastoral preaching. In part, this is a cognitive function, but a more profound reorientation of the person is envisioned that affects both emotions and will in a hopeful way. Enabling believers to face the reality that they are redeemed sinners and that most human problems are rooted in a continuing rebellion against God’s rule in their lives is a

crucial step in the process of dealing hopefully with life.

**3** Making suffering endurable. Hope enables people to endure in the face of profound problems. While rejecting false hopes and facile assurances, the preaching of the gospel enables believers to persist in their living and serving without sinking into despair. The gospel does not erase all suffering and sadness, but it can communicate the love and concern of both God and the Christian community.

**4** Strengthening faith. In the face of personal problems, faith is not the assurance that everything will turn out all right. As Tillich defines it, faith is “ultimate concern,” risking life on God in whom we put our trust. With the total investment of the self, with unreserved commitment, Christians are able to approach struggle knowing that the one in whom we trust is with us and sustains us.

**5** Giving a sense of joy. Believers can experience joy even in the midst of trouble. This joy, deeper than happiness, is possible for those who live on this side of Easter. As Douglas John Hall reflects, “a Christian community that has undergone the cross and the night has the right to announce the dawn.”<sup>2</sup> Preaching is a prime medium for that joyful announcement....

When we move from radical losses like death the response of funeral preaching to more general preaching about loss, it is important to note that many of the same steps are involved in both the diagnosis of the loss and the preparation of the sermon.

Briefly, the preacher begins with the problem of loss and its dynamics, this is true whether the loss is personal (for example, aging, with a potential loss of vitality and meaning), congregational (for example key plant closure with loss of jobs), or societal (for example, the passage of a way of life). As part of the diagnostic process, the preacher reflects about what people are feeling, what theological questions are being asked, and what images of loss may be useful in preaching.

With specific problems of loss diagnosed, the preacher seeks a clear understanding of God's good news. The preacher asks again and again questions like: What is God doing here? Where is hope to be found? What biblical texts contain theological themes to address this loss? What images in the Bible, in literature, or in life can be employed to make hope vivid and memorable for listeners? Answers to these questions will help the pastor formulate a sermon that is truly pastoral.

## FINDING HOPE IN THE MIDST OF LOSS

Mourners live by hope even as they experience loss as an instance of hopelessness. The pastoral preacher has various resources to help mourners live in hope.

In the Old Testament the term death is often "used as a metaphor for those things which hinder full life."<sup>1</sup> It is used in the book of Ezekiel to describe the exilic community, imprisoned and demoralized in Babylon. The Word of the Lord comes to the valley of dry bones and brings them back to life. The graves open up, and the

people are brought home to the land of Israel (see Ezekiel 37). These images of bleached bones and open graves can speak volumes to persons whose suffering has left them imprisoned or decimated.

In the fourth Gospel, death becomes a metaphor for the type of existence that the followers of Jesus have transcended. Though they die biologically, Jesus' followers do not participate in an existence that is oriented toward death. The presence of the suffering and risen Lord gives life to believers beginning in the present age. Those who hear the word of Jesus and believe have already passed from death to life (see John 5:24). And in raising Lazarus from death, Jesus proclaims that, for believers, he is the key to both resurrection from death and new life in the present (see John 11:1-27).

The contemporary rediscovery of baptism, with its connection between Jesus' death and resurrection and new life, is also a source of hope. Using a variety of words and signs, the first Christians proclaimed that death to sin has already occurred in baptism and that the despair of physical death

and loss is qualified and eased for those who are washed and sealed. Believers are initiated into the community of the end time where sin and death are overcome daily (see Rom. 6:1-11). Life remains a struggle, but in the risen Christ, in his body the church, believers already begin to experience new life.

The pall, placed over the casket at the entrance of the church, is a stylized form of the basic baptismal garment. To the initiated, such a symbol suggests a robe of righteousness, a garment of victory....

As Paul makes clear, behind baptism stands the crucified Christ, who witnesses to the real source of our comfort and hope, namely, a suffering God. It is only a God of suffering who can minister to us in our suffering. Indeed, the One who gave up the only Son to suffering turns to suffering

believers before they turn to God (see Luke 15). Through Word and Sacrament, God offers support and comfort for lonely and anxious believers, inviting them to turn to the divine presence, even as in their darkness the Healer turns to them.

The efficacy of the crucified God is often ambiguous in the midst of traumatic loss. Suffering believers walk by faith, not by inerrant sight or, as Paul says, "now we see in a mirror, dimly... Now [we] know only in part" (1 Cor. 13:12). The comfort of baptism is that God acts to accept us as his own, even when we in our grief have turned away from God or even have turned against our source of hope.

Persons and communities who have experienced any kind of loss have a desperate need to find meaning in life. When a relationship is broken or a valued possession destroyed, life suddenly seems empty and devoid of meaning. Pastoral Preachers help listeners to face the reality of loss as the first step toward healing.

Pastoral preachers also point beyond loss to a God who is for life, not just for new life after death but for new life that begins now in the waters of baptism. They proclaim Christ crucified, for this Christ is a man of sorrows who is acquainted with loss. He is able and willing to travel with us through the dark recesses of grief and to bring healing to our sorrowing spirit. □

<sup>1</sup> J. Randall Nichols, *The Restoring Word: Preaching as Pastoral Communication* (NY: Harper, 1987), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas John Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 221.

<sup>3</sup> Lloyd R. Bailey, Sr., *Biblical Perspectives on Death* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979).

Excerpted from *Preaching God's Compassion* by LeRoy H. Aden and Robert G. Hughes, © 2002 Augsburg Fortress. Used by permission.



**Leroy Aden is Professor Emeritus of Pastoral Theology at Lutheran Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. Robert Hughes is Professor of Homiletics and former President of Lutheran Theological Seminary.**

See p. 23 to order.