SERMON Starters

Will Andrews

February 25, 2007

First Sunday in Lent

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Romans 10:8-13; Luke 4:1-13

How We Tell Our Story

This reading confronts us with a curious description of the manner in which an Israelite, upon entering the Promised Land, should offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving from the first fruits of the harvest. After making a declaration, which seems at first proud or triumphant, the pilgrim proceeds to recite the collective story of the Israelites before entering Canaan. Far from a story of pride and achievement, almost every detail of the liturgy that follows exposes the insignificance of this people's beginnings or any accomplishments they might claim for themselves.

The Chosen People began as desert nomads with no claim to land, much less possessions. They multiplied in a place that was not their home and eventually became enslaved there. Then something happened—in their affliction they cried out and God delivered them mightily. In effect, the pilgrim confesses, "We were nobody and we had nothing—that is, until God acted and claimed us as God's own. So I offer now the fruits I enjoy back to God from whence they came."

As we enter the time of self-examination and penance that is Lent, considering how we tell our stories is a useful exercise. Some tell their stories by reciting a litany of personal accomplishments and all those things achieved by one's own effort. Others among us tell our stories as a series of chance events unconnected to one another. The proper understanding of our stories—as individuals and as a community of faith—is located within God's story. The self-examination and penance of Lent invite us rethink how we tell our story—a story that gives us great reason to celebrate.

March 4, 2007

Second Sunday in Lent

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17–4:1; Luke 9:28-36

Anxious for a Sign

At this point in the Abraham saga, the promise of descendants has been made and threatened more than once. The text is unclear as to exactly how much time has elapsed, but most of us can identify with Abram's impatience. It is an impatience that borders on doubt. Even as God speaks words of comfort—"I am your shield and your reward"—another sign is desired. The text clearly says that Abram believed, so the issue here is not a lack of faith necessarily, but rather a lack of patience.

Without any reluctance, Abram left his home and all he knew to answer God's call with only the assurance of God's words (Gen 12). Now he begins to wonder when God will fulfill the promise and how. Notice that God speaks first in anticipation of Abram's anxiety. Did Abram not listen? God is his shield and reward, yet he dares to ask, "What can you give me?" Even when humans falter, God is faithful and responds abundantly. Not only is the promise of descendants and land renewed, but for the first time the word "covenant" is used to signify the personal relationship God intends for this people.

While the covenant ceremony enacted here seems strange to us, what it represents should not—God provides signs of assurance in the midst of doubt. Abram asks, "What can you give me?" and God gives a covenant that seals the promise. God has given us many signs of God's enduring promise as well. The season of Lent offers us unique, instructive symbolism, which together with the cross and the Spirit, assure us we journey toward the place prepared for us by the same God of Abraham.

March 11, 2007

Third Sunday in Lent

Isaiah 55:1-9; Psalm 63:1-8; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

Invitation to Abundance, Call to Repentance

Set in the latter part of the exile, this hymn of joy celebrates the coming restoration of displaced people of Israel. The second verse suggests that some sort of confusion of values exists among the audience. They devote their labors to "that which does not satisfy" and exhaust their resources on "that which is not bread" (v.2) What should be their deepest desire is something to which no price can be assigned and which no amount of money can buy. This is an invitation to the abundant life of participating in God's plan for the world.

Similar to that of the original audience of this text, the experience of many people today is one of exile. Probably

very close to where we each live or work there are exiles. The exiles include people displaced—physically or psychologically—by natural disaster, war, abuse, poverty, or even exclusion from full participation in the church. If we answer the invitation ourselves, in what ways are we required in turn to extend the invitation to others?

Appropriate to the season, the invitation is accompanied by a call to repentance. Easter gives us certainty of the abundant life which God offers, but though freely given, God's grace is certainly not cheap. While God promises to bless God's people and set them apart as a witness to the nations, God also demands that we actively seek God, repent, and ask forgiveness. In some cases we must confess our complicity in the various forms of imposed exile and humbly acknowledge that God's ways are not our own (v. 8).

March 18, 2007

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32;
2 Corinthians 15:16-21;
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

A Passover of Obedience

The first reading this Sunday provides a wonderful opportunity to lift up the rich meaning of the Passover and the heritage we share with our Jewish sisters and brothers, especially in this season. Similar to the confession of Deuteronomy 26 we heard on the first Sunday of Lent, Passover is a teaching meal intended to recall God's saving acts to liberate the Hebrew people from the bondage of slavery in Egypt, to give thanks, as well as look forward to an even greater hope. Thus the Torah command to keep the Passover celebration, like the entire Law, is not exactly a means to salvation or righteousness. Instead, observance of the Law is a response to a deliverance that God has already accomplished and the benefits of which God's people already enjoy.

In the present story of the first Passover, it is possible to interpret the cessation of manna as the logical effect of the people's compliance. Whether such a connection exists or not, keeping the Passover while camped in Gilgal is an act of obedience to God's command and an expression of thanksgiving for salvation which began long before this day.

The Sacrament of Holy Communion and other parts of our tradition have the same intended functions. These are especially relevant to Lent, a traditional time of preparation of candidates for Baptism or Confirmation. It is fitting for all the saints, both new and mature, to reflect on the meaning behind our holy traditions during this Lenten season.

March 25, 2007

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126;
Philippians 3:4-14; John 12:1-8

That They Might Declare My Praise

Speaking to the exiles, Isaiah calls them to expect a new deliverance that God will accomplish using the Persian king Cyrus as an instrument. "The former things" of the exile and all of the suffering it involved will soon be forgotten as it is overshadowed by the "new thing" God is about to do. Through the prophet, God asks, "Don't you see it?" The signs are there and the promise firm, so the blessing that comes should be seen as it already "springs forth" (v. 19) After the long march into exile, God will make a "way in the desert" for their safe return home. In the desert, water will be provided to quench the thirst of all who choose that path.

The new thing God is about to perform will be so great that even wild animals will honor God. So, certainly, it will be reason for humanity to offer praise. In fact, that is the purpose of this new thing—"the people whom I formed for myself . . . that they might declare my praise" (v. 21). Attendance in most of our churches will be greater on Easter Sunday, as on a couple of other "high" holy days. Isaiah reminds the exiles and us that worship is both a proper response to the great plan of salvation unfolding before us and the meaning of our very existence. We were created by God, for God, to declare God's praise. This is true on the fifth Sunday of Lent, Easter Sunday, and every other day of our lives. What would be different if we evaluated every decision or action by the question, "How does this glorify God?"

April 1, 2007

Palm/Passion Sunday

Liturgy of the Palms: Luke 19:28-40; Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29
Liturgy of the Passion: Isaiah 50:4-9; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 22:14–23:56

The Servant's Witness

I once heard a preacher ask in a Palm Sunday sermon, "Wouldn't anyone in their right mind choose a parade over the passion?" That is exactly the choice set before the preacher by the lectionary on Palm Sunday—to read either the account of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem or the graphic description of his suffering, which culminates on the cross. Because many churches do not offer worship services on Good Friday, there is a need to read the story of the Passion on some other occasion during the year and Palm Sunday is suggested.

In the Isaiah text it seems that the Suffering Servant, possibly to be identified with the prophet himself, is struck and abused for no reason. It is not surprising that these words resonated with witnesses to the crucifixion and those who first heard the stories as they struggled to make sense of Jesus' death. The Servant's pain is not glorified, nor is it legitimized. Nonetheless, by the knowledge of God's presence the Servant is vindicated and able to find strength in the midst of agony. The power of God's abiding presence and the urgency of the task "to sustain the weary with a word" are greater than the anguish and humili-

ation experienced. Clearly this does not resolve the enduring "problem of pain" that has mystified all who dare to address it since the beginning of time, but it does remind us that even in our pain God is still God and remains with us. Moreover, God has a purpose for us in the meantime.

April 8, 2007

Easter Sunday

Isaiah 65:17-25; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; 1 Corinthians 15:19-26; John 20:1-18

It's Not in the Details

The Gospel story read in churches around the world on Easter morning is one that defies explanation. No matter how interesting or creative apologetic sermons might be, I have yet to hear a single attempt at explanation that did justice to the mystery and wonder of the resurrection. Even with the best intentions, a defense or rationalization of the resurrection risks stripping it of the source of its power—mystery or wonder. The task presented to the preacher on Easter morning is not to elucidate and verify the details of the resurrection, but rather to proclaim how our lives are shaped and changed by its power.

In the account itself, to those who did not experience the empty tomb or see it with their own eyes the words of the women's report seemed "an idle tale" (v. 11), I suggest leaving the text to stand on its own by reading it slowly to allow each word to settle on the ears of the larger-than-usual congregation. Like some of my Intro to Religious Studies students who hardly attend outside of test days, some will not be present again in worship until Mothers' Day or even Christmas. The preacher should take advantage of this rare time together by focusing on the details and possibilities of life lived in light of the resurrection instead of the details of the resurrection. Maybe someone in the congregation—perhaps one of the faithful or even one of the "holiday" members—will be led by the Spirit to go forth to share and live the news that "Christ is risen. Risen indeed!" ❑

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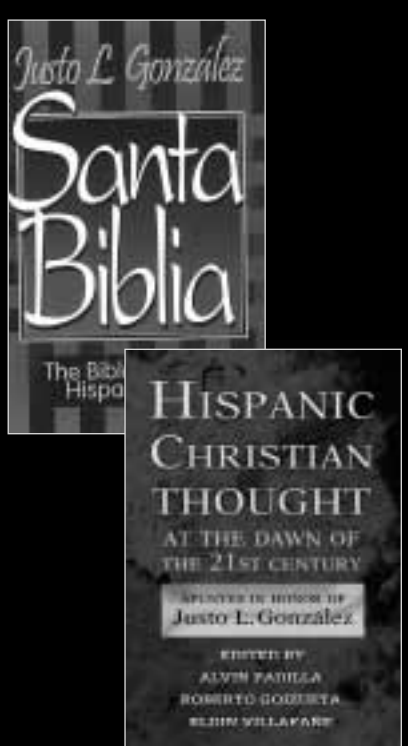
Exploring Spirituality Through Hispanic Eyes



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