

David N. Mosser



Preaching the Seasons of Lent and Easter

What is a preacher to do with texts as “tried and true” as those passages that the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) offers us at Lent and Easter? Because we live in a culture that tends to devalue tradition and instead exalts the unusual, what can we preachers do with scripture lessons that honor tradition but may come across as archaic to many? Of course, that Scripture needs a human defense as a word that speaks directly to the human condition is ludicrous on its face. Yet, the concern for preachers is how we can re-present the gospel in ways that are timely to our people, while at the same

time help our congregations recognize that Scripture is as up-to-date as the daily newspaper.

This issue recently addressed me in an almost revelatory encounter with my children. One morning my boys and I were negotiating what to watch together that evening on television. As I held the television listings from the morning newspaper, I offered several suggestions. Each time I suggested a particular program, one of them would say, “Already seen it. Move on.”

Ironically, I remembered saying that sort of thing many times in my life; however, I no longer mind watching television programs two or three times. In fact, the television reruns I watch are often so complicated that perhaps I need to view them multiple times merely to understand the fullness of the narrative these programs relate. I do not chalk this up to feeble-mindedness so much as to maturity. Seeing things more than once, such as a motion picture, allows me to notice details that I could simply not absorb in merely one viewing.

This reflection on something as mundane as television brings to mind something of deeper consequence. What is true for watching films is doubly true for reading what we might describe as great literature. Musing on this subject of multiple viewings of



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a film, or multiple readings of particular book, brings me back to a discovery about Scripture, especially texts that are conceivably overly familiar. When preachers come to RCL texts for Lent/Easter, Year B, our congregations may look at an individual preaching text and say along with my children, “Already heard it. Move on.” Yet, for spiritually mature people, these passages’ familiarity offers preachers a wonderful portal to reenter this text in significant ways. By vigilant inspection, that is, not by “a facile once-over,” preachers may plumb the profound treasures of Scripture for their congregations.

Beyond a careful reading of a scripture text, one of the most helpful things that pastors can do to help congregations delve deeper into a particular text is to help people understand the liturgical context of the scripture lessons. In other words, why did the lectionary creators choose this specific text for this particular Sunday lesson? Thus, good preaching does two things. Good preaching first helps congregations understand the liturgical circumstance of Lent/Easter texts. Second, good preaching offers a more deep-seated reading of these sacred writings. By adhering to these two specific practices, preachers present their people access to weighty spiritual riches our faith furnishes.

How does a preacher put these principles of reading a text in depth along with setting the Scripture into its liturgical context? I would offer the following days and texts in Lent and Easter as examples of liturgical context and deeper reading.

March 5, 2006

First Sunday in Lent (Year B)

Mark 1:1-9

Mark 1:1-9 is the Gospel text for the First Sunday in Lent (RCL) and addresses the human temptation to sin. We come to this conclusion because the Gospel readings in Years A and C for the corresponding day come from the texts that describe Jesus’ temptation (see Matt. 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13). Mark’s Gospel does not furnish the particulars in the temptation story per se, as do Matthew and Luke. Rather, Mark connects Jesus’ baptism to the Spirit driving Jesus into the wilderness. There is something about the beauty and sacredness of baptism that Mark wants to join to the very genuine human experience of temptation.

In preaching this text on the First Sunday of Lent, knowing that this Sunday the traditional theme concerns temptation, I would probe the issue of what happens after John baptizes Jesus. For what happens to Jesus after baptism will help today’s believers come to grips with what happens to us after baptism. I might begin with a statement followed by a rhetorical question. Perhaps something like: “Someone once told me that if you confessed Jesus as Christ and joined the church, then your troubles would be over. Has anyone ever said anything like that to you?”

Reading the text at a deeper and more probing level, the preacher would do well to flesh out that baptism is not some “silver bullet.” Instead, baptism is a way to live life in covenant with God. To live an authentic life is to become vulnerable to the authentic trials and temptations that life throws at us. Ironically, many times we assume that baptism protects us from evil and temptation. However, upon closer scrutiny this text reminds us that it is baptism that often does what the Spirit does to Jesus. “The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness,” and surely Mark reminds us that this eventuality is in our future as well. Good preachers will also take care to explore what the word

wilderness (or *desert*) denotes in Israel’s tradition.

Wilderness is a word that conjures images of privation and fear. Yet, it is also in the wilderness that God often offers divine revelation. The book of Exodus uses the term *wilderness* in at least

twenty-five verses. Because Exodus is a biblical theme that summons recollections of freedom and liberation, preachers have an opportunity to help people see that it is in the wilderness of life—where the Spirit takes us after baptism—that we may find grace and freedom. Liturgically, preachers may legitimately make connections between Lent and the Christian’s wilderness journey in sin toward God’s liberating grace.

March 26, 2006

Fourth Sunday in Lent (Year B)

Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

In both the Third and Fourth Sundays in Lent, the lectionary finds Israel in the desert or wilderness. As Israel’s wilderness journey lasted forty years and Jesus endured forty days in the desert, this Lenten Sunday concerns what happens to believers in places of temptation, a traditional interpretation of the desert places. Niebuhr via Luther via Augustine claims that sin materializes in two modes: the sins of pride and despair. Pride asserts that people have no need of God, while despair declares that my situation is so wretched that even God cannot assist me. Evidently, despairing people judge that they are beyond God’s power and grace—thus, despair is in effect another guise of pride.

In preaching these two closely connected texts, one would do well to explore one of the primary metaphors—the snake. In Numbers the symbol of the serpent is a mixed bag. The account uses the serpent as an image of God’s wrath against the people’s murmuring critical of both God and Moses. Yet, Moses fashions a serpent and places it on a pole. This act has a curative value. It heals those bitten by serpents. Perhaps one of many conclusions preachers may draw is that even in the midst of God’s judgment of the people, God also offers healing grace.

It is the Number’s narrative to which John refers. John con-

nects the lifting up of the healing serpent to God lifting up Jesus on a pole, or more traditionally, the cross. What follows this image of the lifting up of Jesus is the lifting of the people mired in the wilderness temptation. What saves people, or heals them (the word *salvation* and *health* derive from the same Greek word) is God's grace manifest in the apparently vilely evil act of crucifixion. Thus, the sermon's thrust might suggest that even amidst the perceptible evil in the world God always offers the prospect of unconditional love. The Easter resurrection story places an exclamation point on John's penultimate image of the lifting up of Jesus in John 3.

April 9, 2006
Passion/Palm Sunday:
Liturgy of the Passion (Year B)
 Mark 14:1—15:47

Passion/Palm Sunday presents a preacher with so much text that it is nearly as if there is no lectionary. In fact, if a preacher wants to empty a typical UM church, then she or he might designate this entire passion lesson as the day's preaching text. Be prepared to watch congregants "flee from the wrath to come." Passion Sunday offers a great deal of liberty in choosing a sermon text. Some churches may opt for a reading of the entire passion story, but this seems unlikely. Thus, preachers will predictably select more manageable pericopes from which to preach. The one I will explore is Mark 15:33-39.

The liturgical context is self-evident; this Sunday begins Holy Week. Like a funeral service, few will need an explanation of the day's importance. Some preachers may want to survey the implications of "the darkness that covered the whole land," Jesus' quotation from Psalm 22, or the misunderstandings about Jesus' plaintive calling for Elijah. Other preachers may employ the tearing of the temple curtain to connect the temple of Jesus' body on the cross with the temple in Jerusalem. However, the centurion's confession of faith strikes me as a helpful place for homiletical discovery. As readers recall, the centurion confessed, "Truly this man was God's Son!" (Mark 15:39).

Plainly, Mark reflects that although Jesus' disciples traveled with him, Mark also depicts them, in the main, as "dim-witted." Examples abound, but when Jesus stills the storm at sea, Mark tells readers that Jesus asked the disciples, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith? And they were filled with great awe" (Mark 4:40-41). Awe-filled, perhaps, but ignorant of Jesus' sig-

nificance. After feeding the five thousand, Jesus walks to the twelve on the water and gets into the boat. Mark intimates that the disciples still lack awareness. Mark understatedly records that the disciples "were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the

loaves, but their hearts were hardened" (Mark 6:51-52). A reading of Mark unmistakably reveals that those disciples who spent the most time with Jesus still remain without true knowledge of who Jesus was or why Jesus came (see also: Mark 8:14, 33; 9:32-34; 10:10, 13, 24, 28, 32, 35-

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45; 13:1-4; 14:19, 37).

When the centurion of Mark 15 enters the story, Mark has already informed us that "All of them deserted him and fled" (Mark 14:50). Every person that one might expect to stand with Jesus in his hour of greatest need, at least from the human perspective, has "turned tail and run." Even Peter denies Jesus (Mark 14:50). In this case, when we separate the grain from the chaff, no grain remains. All of which makes the confession "Truly this man was God's Son!" all the more intriguing. Mark never tells all. Rather he gestures toward the truth. The preacher might well explore the nature of this confession by an outsider—a Roman, a soldier, and a Gentile, at that. What kind of confession is this? Is it an innocent remark on the scene passing before him or is the soldier's confession a full-blown affirmation of faith? A way to exploit this confession rhetorically is to draw the congregation into this odd question—and then inform them that the answer in their lives may well emerge during this Holy Week.

May 28, 2006
Seventh Sunday of Easter (Year B)
 Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

One of the joys of preaching Easter texts is that Easter is not merely a day, but a season of the liturgical year. Therefore, preachers can use the euphoria of an entire Easter season to buoy congregations who face too much bad news in their day-to-day immersion in the world. We might profitably examine many Sundays in Easter, and in 2006 seven such Sundays occur. On the final Sunday in Easter, the Psalm extols the virtue of the law, while the epistle lesson submits that God offers believers eternal life through the Son. John's Gospel is part of Jesus' high priestly prayer that asks for God's protection of the disciples. But, I suggest that we look to the first lesson for the seventh Sunday, which is Acts 1:15-17, 21-26.

The Acts' pericope relates the story of the "replacement disci-

ple” for Judas Iscariot. The reason that God leads the apostles to replace Judas is simply to complete the perfect complement of the twelve, rendered “less than perfect” by Judas’s death. Acts deems two candidates worthy of this honor and responsibility: “So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias.” In good Old Testament fashion, the eleven cast lots for the final apostle to complete the biblical number twelve (see, for other examples about the casting of lots: Leviticus 16:8, Joshua 18:6, 1 Chronicles 24:31, Nehemiah 10:34, Job 6:27, Psalm 22:18, Joel 3:3, Obadiah 1:11, Jonah 1:7). As the story concludes, Luke informs the reader “the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.” Unfortunately, the balance of the New Testament never mentions Matthias again. He is lost to history. This oddity leaves believers wondering what happened to him. Perhaps this is a fruitful avenue of exploration for the preacher.

A friend once cynically remarked that “if one wants to keep a church from bugging you for church membership, then join it. You will never hear from it again.” As jaded as this may be, it is true enough to cause pause. What is it about the fervor of the beginning of the faith journey that causes the passion to cool? A preacher might pursue the course of addressing “the long haul” nature of lifelong faith and service through discipleship.

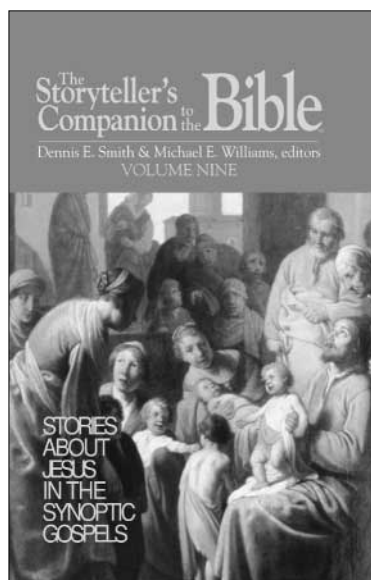
Of course, Matthias may have had a wonderfully fruitful ministry that the New Testament simply fails to record—or notice. A second sermon slant might speak of the joy of faith that is quiet and unassuming. This type of faith finds contentment in simply operating “under the radar” of public notice, and yet is true in purpose to the Realm of God. Many ordinary Christians do extraordinary things at the local church level.

A colleague shared that she had read a remarkable letter to God from a fictitious young woman named Amanda. Amanda had purportedly written: “Dear God, Please put another holiday between Christmas and Easter. There is nothing good in there now.” Perhaps Amanda speaks for more than only her constituency of children. By linking the liturgical seasons of Lent and Easter, perhaps we may even deepen the joy that people experience during the season of resurrection. As the four Sundays in Advent heighten the anticipation and glee of Christmas, so too does the pain of the Lenten story of Jesus intensify the wonder and grace of God at Easter. Preachers will do well to interpret the liturgical readings in light of the worship seasons in which they fall. In addition, preachers will do faithful service to the people of God when they read the

texts at a deep enough level to challenge their congregations to take a second look at the Bible that we all think we already know. Preachers can help guide the faithful into the many hidden gems in Scripture that we too easily overlook. Lent and Easter are good seasons to offer such a pulpit gift. □

Editor’s Note: This article on the Lent/Easter texts replaces the Sermon Starters in this issue. We will return to the previous pattern in March/April, beginning with Sunday, April 23.

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