

PREACHING LENT

"Preacher of Grace"

What the preacher will be preaching in Lent is what we preach all the year--the gracious call of God to renewal. Lent provides us with a focus time, to remind us of what is always true: God is always reaching out to enable us to change, be renewed and deepen our commitment to God and God's chosen community. We are always in need of this renewal. Lent is a moment of grace to wake us up and call us to pay attention to our situation. In my Dominican tradition, we call our founder, St. Dominic, "Preacher of Grace." As we begin this holiest of seasons, we would do well to imitate Dominic and renew our own commitment to keep our preaching rooted in grace, and to find ways to proclaim it with creativity that flows from prayer and our own personal experience of that grace.

Repentance

As we preach repentance this Lent, we want to preach the biblical notion of the word. The scriptural writers will call for repentance, but in so doing, they show that repentance means that we confess our own guilt and need for mercy. Along with this first movement of confession is a second one, a confession of faith that acknowledges God's justice and mercy.

Our repentance is a gift of grace. By itself, repentance does not cause our forgiveness or make us worthy to receive it. All is grace. The preacher's call for repentance is based on the knowledge that God is kind and ready to forgive. God is not under obligation to forgive when we repent, but does so willingly. Nothing we do earns God's response and the preacher needs to be careful not to preach a religion of works. God's love is freely given, never earned. God responds to prayer, but this response is always gift.

Thus, in preparation for Lent, the preacher's private reading might be a review of the theology of grace. I recently read Thomas C. Oden's, *The Transforming Power of Grace*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993.) The author draws from "the ecumenical consensus" on the doctrine of grace (i.e., the early Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians, councils and creeds) to "offer a basic doctrine of grace in plain language". He says the purpose of preaching is to attest to "the history of grace effectively at work amid the history of sin" (p. 16). He assigns the task to preachers to tell the story of grace that is entering each of our lives, and if we preach in this way, Christianity, "would find vital empowerment." The Lenten

preacher then, needs to emphasize that during Lent, the subject of the season is God, the action is grace, and we are the objects of God's beneficent action.

Important Themes of Lent: Baptism and Penance

The Sacramentary prayer preceding the blessing of ashes says, "May they keep this Lenten season in preparation for the joy of Easter." Even as we celebrate the penitential aspect of Lent, we never lose focus of our movement towards Easter. The lectionary suggests the use of Year A scriptures each year for the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent. If this is done, and there is good reason to do so, notice the strong baptismal theme beginning with the Third Sunday (Year A). The account of the Samaritan woman has "living water" as its core symbol, while the man born blind (Fourth Sunday--Year A) receives his sight after washing at the pool. The Fifth Sunday (Lazarus, Year A) reminds us of the life we anxiously await which the death of Jesus has already achieved for us. The preacher will be inclined then to stay close to preaching that call for preparation for initiation (for some), and for all, penance and reconciliation in the light of the new life we have received in Baptism.

Connected to the water imagery in the Lenten readings are themes of thirst and desert. Remember that we go into the desert after our baptism. We are already saved and have the promised Spirit given us as a result of the Lord's death and resurrection. Lent should not be preached as a time to "earn" forgiveness but as an opportunity to turn to a loving God who desires to continue to set us free.

The preacher might stir up awareness of our need for God. We have been on our own and look at the results--a world floundering in darkness, where the powerful exert their will over the weak and vulnerable; the "haves" of our country grow richer, while the gap of the poor widens and deepens. We, as Adam and Eve, have decided we could determine our own destinies. Now we find ourselves suffering the consequences of our independence. We wander long in the desert and lose our way. Do we recognize our situation? What will bring us to our senses? The Lenten preacher needs to wake us up by making us aware of our situation and our need for God. We are blind (the Fourth Sunday's Gospel--A), but God has taken pity and walks among us and calls us to the pool of living water that opens our eyes. The preacher invites us to turn away from the darkness of misplaced trust towards the one who is our light. Leaving behind our former selves will be painful, the preacher calls us to that rejection of former ways so that we can see the promised life awaiting us.

The Sourcebook for Sundays and Seasons 1996, (Liturgy Training Publications) referring to the readings for Year A, suggests that they are especially chosen to speak to the catechumens and their journey; but also, to us, who share their journey of struggles and growth toward renewal. It also suggests that we journey through Lent as though we were all catechumens. It makes sense, since all of us are involved in reconversion.

We are to listen to the readings and pray the prayers as though we were approaching the waters of life for the first time.... Thus, we all prepare to come to the water again, to be more deeply converted to Christ and to renew our baptismal promises with conviction. (p. 88)

We preachers are advised to prepare our messages from the perspective of the catechumens; as if all hearing us are hearing the message for the first time. Perhaps this might be a way to enliven our preaching and catch some of the excitement the story had for those who waited a long time for such good news.

Lent: A Turning to the Word:

The preacher will also need to focus on our common identity. Prior to Vatican II's liturgical renewal, Lenten preaching emphasized individual spirituality and penance. What was almost lost was our communal identity and the emphasis on preparing for Easter--the original intent of the Forty Days. The "Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy" recalled us to Lenten emphasis on Baptism and penance. It also encourages us to "more diligently listen to the Word of God." The preacher's obligation then, is to place emphasis on that Word, for source, inspiration and direction in preaching. The preacher needs to remind the faithful that, before all else, we need to apply ourselves to an attentive listening to the Word of God through meditative reading and to its prayerful application to our lives. This more attentive hearing of the Word will bear fruit in a deeper prayer and have influence on the transformation of our lives.

Since the preacher will be preaching from the Scriptures, and people are generally disposed to do "something extra" during Lent, we might encourage our listeners to begin a daily period of Bible reading and reflection. Parishes might reinforce this recommendation by offering special sessions of scriptural reflection and prayer. The upcoming Sunday readings will be a good focus for these reflection groups.

The First Readings:

I have frequently used Advent and Lent as occasions to preach from the First Readings. These Hebrew texts are particularly applicable to the spirit of the season. As a preacher, I find it refreshing to turn to these texts for my own prayer and I find the preparation time for the preachings particularly rich. We preachers can get into a habit of automatically looking at the Gospel reading for the focus of our preaching. This Lent might be a good time to branch out and discover the goldmine in the Hebrew texts. (The letters from the apostles are also neglected in our liturgical preaching---but we will have to deal with that at another time.)

Environment:

Many parishes will simplify their worship space during the Lenten season; while others will dramatically strip the liturgical environment. Lenten decor stands in stark contrast to what we ordinarily see, hear, smell and touch in our worship spaces. Lent is a time for restraint in decorations and such tangible austerity provides the preacher with a chance to address this restraint and call the congregation to what really counts at worship--the community of gathered faithful. The preacher's message of sobriety and focus on our need for God, is supported by the many non-verbal symbols the congregation "hears" in a simplified worship space.

Fasting

Lent has traditionally been a time for fasting. In a culture of excess, the preacher needs to call us to fast, to change the daily habits of excessive consumption that dull us to the promptings of God and the needs of others. Fasting may be done in a variety of ways. Perhaps the suggestions from Assembly and those of W.A. Ward which follow, will help the preacher address a practice that can draw us all to our senses.

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