

From Death to Life: Themes for Lenten Preaching

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Lent is a very ancient season in the life of the church, and therefore a clear set of themes has developed during this long history. If we are aware of the thematic characteristics of Lent, then the passages that the lectionary presents to us make more sense, and the unity of the season is more visible.

In addition to specific themes, there are also other characteristics of Lent that need to be taken into account. First, since it is a season and not simply a day, it is possible to develop some themes over the entire period. Therefore series can be considered when they build on major concerns of Lent that can readily take several sermons to develop different aspects of the concern. Second, in many congregations, Lent has traditionally been a time for added times of study or special programs outside of the usual congregational schedule. It is possible, therefore, to consider what themes in preaching might lead to or flow from special studies that are being undertaken by church members outside of the worship service.

Historical Background

Particularly in the western church, the time that developed into the Lenten season was, in the early church, the final preparation for those who were to be baptized on Easter Eve—the Saturday night before Easter. Originally it was a shorter period, beginning on a Wednesday about three and a half weeks before Easter. Baptisms occurred after several years of teaching and training for adults, who then, with their children, were determined to be ready for the serious step of baptism, which meant entrance into the church, the Body of Christ.

The traditional lessons for the season stressed water—its creation and its typology in the history of salvation. The ark that saved Noah and his family when the waters of judgment and cleansing fell on the earth; the big fish that saved disobedient Jonah from a watery grave; the Exodus on dry land that freed the children of Israel; the water from the rock that nourished them; the cloud that led them; the crossing of the Jordan that marked their entrance into the Promised Land: all of these, and others, were seen as precursors of baptism, and were part of the readings of the time.

Baptism was seen as particularly appropriate on that night between the death of Jesus and his resurrection. In the same way that Jesus died and was raised to new life, so the one being baptized died to the old life in the waters and was raised to a new life. They were born again to this new life in the waters of baptism. They were crucified with Christ, and raised with him. All of these were prime images for the early church.

Many changes took place during the early middle ages in the western church. In any local congregation there were fewer and fewer people entering the faith from outside of the church. Most were born within it. The long period of preparation as a catechumen was not needed, since most were baptized as infants. Furthermore, theological changes made early baptism imperative, since baptism was increasingly seen as essential to salvation, even for infants. One did not wait until the next Easter.

Lent therefore underwent changes. It kept many of the baptismal themes, but increasingly the stress on human mortality, on preparation for judgment, on the temptations in this life that must be guarded against, on the demands of discipleship of those already baptized: these took on greater emphasis. The forty days of Jesus's temptations in the wilderness *after* his baptism now became the model, tied as they were to the forty years in the wilderness of the Israelites *after* their crossing of the sea, and the forty days in the ark. The season was lengthened to forty days, not counting Sundays.

The mortality theme began the season: Ash Wednesday reminded Christians that we are all dust, and to dust we shall return. The Lenten period was one of penitence, sorrow for sins in the light of the judgment that might strike us in death at any time. There were constant reminders of the cost of discipleship, the narrow way that leads to the cross, the discipline that made disciples.

Discipline was a hallmark of the period. Fasting was mandatory—except on Sundays, which kept their character as minor feast days. Celebrations such as weddings were seen as inappropriate. By the late Middle Ages, there were so many rules and regulations governing behavior in Lent that the real discipline of the season had been lost. Not to eat meat, but gladly to have lobster, is hardly a great sacrifice. The legalism had changed the intention.

At the Reformation, there was a major rejection of the authority of the church to regulate such private matters as forms of discipline and penitence. There was also a rejection of a very crowded liturgical calendar that lost sight of major issues in the plethora of minor ones. Many of us who are Protestants may well have grown up in churches that viewed Lent and its disciplines as largely a Catholic phenomenon. "Giving up something for Lent," or no meat until Easter was not our habit.

In the reforms of Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church also made the disciplines much more private, recognizing that obeying the rules did not lead to the proper spirit necessarily, and could actually hinder true discipline. Furthermore, fasting was not helpful for so many of the world's Catholics who had little to eat. Fasting was their constant and involuntary state.

In more recent years, there has been interest in such disciplines again, in a healthier way, as the liturgical renewal has urged us to take a new look at the whole meaning of Lent, and the possibilities it gives us for strengthening our Christian lives.

Present Thematic Possibilities

1. Death: If ever there were a time when a congregation could seriously consider the Christian understanding of death, Lent is that time. In the midst of the crisis caused by a death in the family, it is hardly appropriate to deal dispassionately about planning for death and theological issues that are raised

in the minds of Christians in the contemporary world. However, Lent provides a time when such study can be undertaken without a crisis. Adult classes or special meetings could consider such issues as funeral planning, issues of living wills that give directions for any final medical care, hospice care, organ donations, etc. Appropriate governing bodies could also study the congregation's practices in funerals in the light of any denominational guidance, and make policies or update old policies. If such a study were undertaken by a congregation in several of its components, some preaching that dealt with the understanding of death would be extremely appropriate, and could be a series that included much of the Lenten period.

2. **Baptism:** A study of the meaning of baptism could be developed throughout Lent, and support study in other groups of the church. Lent could be a time for the instruction of parents who wish to have children baptized or of adults who wish to become part of the church. It could be a time for Sunday school classes of a variety of ages to consider the meaning of being baptized—that it is not something that once happened in the past and has no significance now. It could also be a time when the appropriate body of the congregation looked at its understanding of who should be baptized, and clarified its policies. A worship committee could fruitfully consider the way in which baptisms are celebrated. Sermons on the meaning of baptism could therefore not only be helpful and appropriate in themselves, but could also strengthen other efforts in the congregation's life.

Lent ties together the meaning of baptism and our dying with Christ. It ties our death to the significance of the death of Christ. We have therefore considered the possibility of preaching on death and on baptism, both of which are such large issues that a whole Lenten season could be devoted to them.

3. **The Way of the Cross:** In preparation for Good Friday, Lent gives us glimpses into the way God deals with sin and evil, and therefore casts light on the heart of the gospel itself. Jesus understands the risks he runs in continuing on to Jerusalem. Yet he does not alter his way. The way to the cross is the way of encountering, not avoiding, the powers of evil in the world. Redemption involves taking on evil, resisting its power to warp us and yet appearing weak before it. To hate would be to capitulate to evil; to love even our enemies and those who persecute us is to retain the power of the gospel. The cross shows the utter weakness such a life manifests. The resurrection shows its ultimate power. Throughout the Lenten season, the strange, painful, victorious way of the cross can be stressed, tying it to a variety of biblical passages that point to the need for disciples to follow in their own lives the way in which the Lord has gone.

4. **Discipline:** The question of the disciplines of the Christian life also need to be discussed. They are the result of understanding discipleship as following the way of the cross that leads to death. Yet the gospel also stresses that Jesus has died the death that was our due, and therefore we need not fear the death that concludes our life here. Lent, properly considered, avoids completely the thought that to be a Christian is to have an easy and comfortable life. It reminds us that an obedient faith can lead us into painful situations. What is promised is that we will find Jesus there, and, with him, we will find joy and

new life.

There is so much of the “gospel of prosperity” current in our society, that the countertheme of the costly way of the cross would be helpful indeed. Lent is a time when the discipline of our lives, the preparation that is necessary to follow the narrow way can be looked at with seriousness.

Lent often begins with readings that warn against thinking we can be justified by our fasting or almsgiving. It warns us not to make public display of our pious actions. All of this is true, and helpful. However, for many of us and those in our congregations, these are not likely temptations. In fact, many of us are at the opposite pole: we have lost any sense of the connection between “discipline” and “discipleship.” We see little use for times of fasting, either because it seems totally irrelevant to the Christian life as an external action that means nothing, or we are always so “diet conscious” that it seems unnecessary to consider it a religious practice.

Yet Christians in our culture need discipline, and we need it very much. A sermon could readily deal with the meaning of discipline in the Christian life, as a way of bringing our lives under the Lordship of Christ, of seeking to deepen our commitment. Whatever forms of discipline are considered, they cannot be thought of as means of salvation, or as necessary to all Christians. But it would be very helpful to consider, in the light of scripture, what are the temptations of our own lives. Is it our rampant consumerism? our wastefulness? our overloaded lives that have little time for contemplation and prayer? What disciplines—specific acts that are undertaken for a season—would open us to stronger discipleship? Is Lent a time in which we could, as a congregation, as a family, as individuals, practice some specific ways to counteract those characteristics of our culture that most tempt us from fully committed lives?

Sermons on this theme could also lead to some congregational decisions that might be helpful in the years to come. Perhaps there could be a plan to suggest disciplines in the next Lent, and it could well take many months to plan for it.

All that has been said so far points to a common theme that is typical of Lent. The death of Jesus has enormous significance for us. His death and resurrection are the heart of our faith. To prepare for the celebration of his resurrection that will come at Easter, we need to be reminded again and again of the importance of his death for us. But Lent is not only a recollection of the death of Jesus. It is also the reminder that, because we are his followers, we too are called upon to die. Our death is not simply the physical death that we appropriately seek to postpone. It is also the death to the old life, the life of sin, the life that is lived in opposition to the will of God. That death we are to seek to die daily, and baptism is the sign of our dying, even as it is also the sign of the beginning of our new life in Christ.

For many Christians in our congregations, we willingly remember the death of Christ, but only unwillingly do we remember our own dying that is called for. Lent is the time in which that can be done, and done graciously. This is particularly true for the Sundays in Lent up to Passion or Palm Sunday. From there on, the focus should clearly turn to the death of Jesus. Good Friday is the culmination of this. Holy Week therefore has a somewhat

different focus than Lent itself.

These are the major themes that run through the Lenten season. The preacher—and the congregation—could choose one for that year, leaving the others for a different time. There might not be need to vary much from the Common Lectionary, if that is usually used, since these themes are so common to the season that they could well find support on most of the Sundays.

Above all, Lent needs to be seen as preparing a congregation for a transformation. If death is studied, it is not because death is the last word, but precisely because at Easter we are reaffirmed in our faith that it is not. If baptism is the theme, it is not because baptism in itself is an end, but because we are called to live out not only the dying with Christ, but even more, we are called to live, even now, the new life in Christ. If the way of the cross is stressed, it is not because the cross is the end, but precisely because Easter will portray, once again, the victory—the absolute victory—that such a strange way of life leads to. If discipline is emphasized, it is not because it is required for salvation, but because there is real joy in a life that is lived under the Lordship of Christ.

Lent is a preparation, not a goal. It is a preparation for Easter, and therefore a preparation for the new life that is possible in Christ. If it is undertaken in this spirit, then there can be great experimentation in the season, seeking to find what is helpful to a particular congregation. There is no one “right way” to do it. At the same time, an Easter that has had no preparation within a congregation will probably make little difference in their lives. A Lent, well spent, can lead to a joyous and transforming Easter.



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