Preaching the Easter Season Texts

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The General Themes

The Easter season has as its basic theme death and resurrection. That is obvious. Yet that theme is nuanced and applied in a great variety of ways, enough to take us from Ash Wednesday all the way to Easter and beyond. That should not be surprising, since death and resurrection is the heart of the gospel message itself. For the early church, when the celebration of Christmas had not yet begun, every week remembered the death and resurrection of Jesus. Every Sunday was a little Easter.

There was a great Easter celebration once a year. At that time, the candidates for baptism were given their final preparation, in order to be baptized on Easter Eve. Our Lent has developed from that time of final preparation, expanded from a few weeks, to include forty days. The forty days is parallel to the time Jesus spent in the wilderness after his baptism, as well as the forty days in Noah's ark, and the forty years Israel spent in the wilderness before crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land. For the Lenten season, the count excludes Sundays, because they remain a time of rejoicing and cannot be considered a penitential season as Lent became.

Easter Eve was considered the most appropriate time for baptism because it showed that baptism was a dying with Christ and a rising with him. Candidates had been part of the Good Friday services, and then, on Saturday night, they joined in his death so that they could rise with him on Sunday morning, as part of the church, the body of Christ.

Repentance is a natural part of the preparation for baptism. It is a repudiation of the old life of sin and an acceptance of the new life of righteousness. Such a new life is not a human possibility. Only through Christ's death and resurrection is the way open for us to follow, dying to the old and rising to the new. Baptism does not end the struggle between the old and the new, so repentance also is a part of the life of Christians after baptism as well as before. By the time the Lenten tradition was fully developed in the Middle Ages, most people were baptized as infants, so the period before Easter was understood as a time for renewal of the meaning of baptism.

Ash Wednesday

The Easter season begins with Lent, a time of repentance, inaugurated on Ash Wednesday. The readings are common to all three cycles of the church year–A, B, and C. The readings generally assume that people are beginning a time of fasting, and the stress is that ceremonial fasting is not enough. What God wishes is the transformation of life from the ways of sin to the ways of justice and righteousness, not just a carrying out of the religious traditions of the season. The lessons are very strong. Putting together the Isaiah and the II Corinthian texts makes very clear that religious services are not at all what God intends for us in the season. We are aiming to become what Paul describes: righteous people who are able to withstand the temptations of the world around us and live as God intends all human beings to live. As the church year becomes more familiar to many churches that never stressed it in the past, and as it is renewed

in churches that have based their worship on it for centuries, a very serious, clear beginning of the Easter season with an Ash Wednesday service is very important. It sets the tone for what will follow.

The First Five Sundays of Lent

The Sundays in the Lenten season do not follow the pattern of most of the rest of the lectionary, where all of the Gospel lessons come from the same synoptic Gospel. The Gospel lessons in Lent are chosen to reflect the themes of the period–baptism, discipleship, death and resurrection. These Gospel texts are in turn paired with Old Testament readings that historically have been seen as typologically related. That is to say, events in the Old Testament are seen as parallel to and signs of events in the life of Christ, just as the Old Testament itself sees the return from Exile as parallel to the Exodus. Many of these typologies go back to the second century and may even have been in the minds of the Gospel writers.

The first Sunday combines Matthew's account of the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness with the Genesis account of the Fall. Jesus refuses the suggestions of the Evil One while the human couple in Eden gave in to them. The Epistle lesson from Romans 5 shows Jesus as the Second Adam. Psalm 51 stresses confession and repentance. The temptations of Jesus occur after his baptism, and baptism will not end temptations for us either. In fact, the more we try to be obedient, the more we may be aware of opposition to faithfulness. Repentance therefore is not something that is to be done once, but rather is the continuous character of the Christian life. Ash Wednesday begins the period of repentance and renewal of our baptism and therefore repentance is stressed this first Sunday.

The Second Sunday pairs the passage in John 3 about a second birth and God's desire for the salvation of all, with the call and promise to Abraham in Genesis 12. The Epistle lesson is from Romans 4, faith that inherits the promise to Abraham. The Psalm is 121 with its reminder that only the Lord is our true helper, which is the heart of faith. There is an alternative Gospel reading of Matthew 17:1-9 if the Transfiguration is celebrated on this Sunday. The rest of the readings are the same. If ever there was a "movable feast" it is the Transfiguration! In many Protestant churches, the Transfiguration is remembered on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday. The Roman Catholic Church keeps the ancient fixed date of August 6. If the Transfiguration reading is used here, then the disciples have a glimpse of Jesus as the one who fulfills the promises to Israel. There are also words here about the resurrection of the Son of Man.

The Third Sunday combines the woman at the well in John 4, which includes the words about the living water that Jesus gives, with the account in Exodus 17, where the people complain about the lack of water and receive water from the rock. The typology as it was used in the early church would understand that those who are baptized are tempted to be discouraged, even as the Israelites were discouraged in their trek across the wilderness. The Psalm for this day is 95, which mentions the time in the wilderness. We are to trust God who gives us living water through the work of Christ. The Epistle lesson from Romans 5 shows that we are justified by faith and reconciled to God through Christ.

The Fourth Sunday pairs the healing of the man born blind (John 9) with Samuel's anointing of David in I Samuel 16:1-13. The Epistle lesson is from Ephesians 5, that we are called to be children of the light, to awaken from sleep and rise from the dead.

Jesus anoints the eyes of the blind man and he sees. He moves from darkness to light. Samuel anoints David as the future king, even while Saul, the old king, still rules. Jesus, the Son of David, is the true king of the new age of light, even though the old world continues. We are called by our baptism (which the early church also called "illumination") to live in the light and cease the works of darkness. Baptism marks our move from death to life, from darkness to light, from the old age to the new–not completely, but as a beginning, to be completed at our physical death. The Psalm is 23: God leads us as a shepherd through the valley of death to our dwelling with the Lord forever.

The Fifth Sunday parallels Ezekiel's vision of the Dry Bones (Ezekiel 37:1-14) with John's account of the raising of Lazarus. The Epistle lesson is from Romans 8: the One who raised Christ from the dead also gives life to us. The resurrection is the theme of all three lessons, and yet it is a resurrection that comes only after a real death. Those who are baptized are called to die to the old in order to rise to the new life. There is no softening of the reality of death. Resurrection therefore is truly a miracle, a new creation, not something that happens as a matter of course. In all of these readings there is no hint of a natural immortality that humans possess, a part of us that lives on. Only God can call us back into life, and God does this by joining us to Christ. In baptism we join his death and his resurrection. The Psalm is 130, the cry to God out of the depths, with the call to hope in the Lord who alone can redeem us from death.

The Sixth Sunday of Lent

Before looking at the readings for Holy Week, beginning with the Sixth Sunday, something needs to be said about planning for the whole season. The preacher needs to look at the congregation's plans for Holy Week and Easter in order to see what is the culmination, the goal, toward which the earlier Sundays should be directed. In other words, if the congregation has an Easter Eve service with the renewal of baptismal vows, if there are to be baptisms on Easter, or if the confirmation class is to be received on Palm Sunday or on Easter, these events would make a difference. Is the whole Lenten season to be geared to baptism? If there is to be no stress on baptism, is the way of the cross as the meaning of discipleship to be the emphasis? Is there a Good Friday service that most of the congregation attends, or should the Sunday before Easter stress the Passion? Is there a Maundy Thursday service and if so, how will that be related to baptism and/or discipleship? What is to be the basic thrust of the Easter Sunday sermon? How can that message tie in with what has gone before? Also, for congregations that are not accustomed to celebrations of the Lord's Supper every Sunday, where in this last week will there be communion? Will it be on Easter Sunday? On Maundy Thursday? How does this affect the planning?

Such considerations are essential especially before deciding what is to be done with the Sixth Sunday of Lent. In the lectionary there are readings either for Palm Sunday or Passion Sunday. Before the new lectionary, the fifth Sunday was listed as Passion Sunday, but that was so long before Good Friday that it seemed an intrusion. Now it is the Sixth Sunday, just as Holy Week opens. Most church members think of that as Palm Sunday only. If the congregation does not have any occasion to gather for Good Friday, or if there is no dealing with the cross on Maundy Thursday, then the Sixth Sunday must deal with the cross. Otherwise the congregation may celebrate the resurrection without any stress on the cross, and that is a serious problem. We are so

used to the readings for Palm Sunday on that day, even with processions and palms, that it may be difficult to change it abruptly. However, it would be possible to combine the readings so that there is an emphasis not only on the entry into Jerusalem but the events of Friday as well. The hope of the lectionary is that the whole passion narrative could be read. That may be difficult, but somehow, the congregation should not move from the entry into Jerusalem to the resurrection without a strong look at Christ's death in between. Avoiding thinking about death is such a character of the culture that steps must be taken so that the Cross is not overlooked in a desire to have the Good News about Easter without the horror of the death that goes before.

The readings for Palm Sunday include the narrative of Matthew 21:1-11 and portions of Psalm 118. No other readings are listed. For Passion Sunday, the account of the crucifixion in Matthew is used, along with portions of Isaiah 50 that refer to the suffering and vindication of one called to teach the people. The Epistle lesson is the hymn in Philippians 2:5-11, the hymn that shows the humility of Christ, who took the form of a servant and was obedient even to the cross. The Psalm is part of 31, the words of one who is surrounded by enemies and yet trusts in God. The suffering of Jesus is impossible to miss in these lessons.

Holy Week

There are lessons common to cycles A, B, and C for all of the days of Holy Week. The Gospel readings are all from John. All have to do with the words of Jesus about his coming death or narratives about his death. Excellent as the selections are, few congregations will gather for worship every day of Holy Week, and therefore sermons during the week will be unusual, until we come to Maundy Thursday.

The English term "Maundy" comes from the Latin word for "command," and refers to the text always used on this day, John 13:1-17; 31b-35. In this passage Jesus gives his disciples a new commandment, "that you love one another." This is part of the feet-washing narrative found only in John's Gospel. This is combined with Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14, the institution of the Passover, as the Hebrews are about to leave Egypt for the Promised Land. The firstborn of the Egyptians are killed, but those who put the blood on the doorposts are saved. The Epistle lesson is I Corinthians 11:23-26, Paul's recitation of the words of the institution of the Lord's Supper as he had received them.

It is interesting that though John's Gospel contains a meal on this night, it is not "the Last Supper," and it is used on Wednesday night of Holy Week because it contains the words about the betrayal. But Paul's account supplies the institution of the Lord's Supper. For most congregations, a Maundy Thursday service probably includes both communion and at least some mention of feet-washing. The mood is somber because it is in the shadow of the cross.

There was a great change in the celebration of the Lord's Supper beginning in the mid-twentieth century as a result of the liturgical renewal movement. The previous many centuries understood all communion services to stress the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Communion was funereal in character. Little mention was made of the resurrection. This probably remains the character of Maundy Thursday, although usually this service is in the evening and in a more informal setting, perhaps connected with a meal in the church fellowship hall. Some congregations cannot imagine having two communion services in one week–both Thursday and again on Easter–and some

find the combination of communion and the joyful celebration of Easter jarring, since they think of the sacrament primarily as a Good Friday remembrance. However, this is a great opportunity to show that communion is not only a Good Friday service but also, and above all, a celebration of the Risen Lord with his people at the Lord's Table. An Easter celebration makes that possible, but only if the services of Maundy Thursday and Easter are quite different and the congregation is prepared by appropriate teaching during the Lenten period.

Good Friday services vary enormously. In some congregations there is a traditional three-hour service from noon to three o'clock, centering on the Seven Last Words, each with a brief meditation. Other churches have briefer services modeled on the Sunday morning service. In the medieval church this was the one day there was no Communion because it was the remembrance of the original sacrifice from which the sacrament took its life. Some Protestant churches do have communion on Good Friday, although probably not if they just celebrated it the night before on Maundy Thursday. The lessons include the account of the Passion from John, the Suffering Servant hymn in Isaiah, Psalm 22 which includes the words of Jesus on the Cross, and a choice of two passages from Hebrews, both of which refer to the cross.

Because the Maundy Thursday service is usually at night and the Good Friday service is during the day, attendance is usually far greater at the Thursday service, since an increasingly secular society makes little allowance for Good Friday. If the preacher is free to choose passages on Palm/Passion Sunday other than the lectionary ones, and if there is no Good Friday service, some of the readings for Friday could be used on the previous Sunday. Again, it is essential that the congregation have a strong emphasis on the Cross before they celebrate Easter.

The Easter Services

For the early church, the most important service of the whole year occurred late on Saturday night and into Easter morning. This gradually disappeared. As late as the 1950s, in Roman Catholic churches the remnant of the Saturday part of this service was usually held on Saturday morning, with no congregation, and the sole purpose was to provide holy water—especially for baptisms for the rest of the year. Vatican II changed this, requiring that the service be restored to its position on Saturday night, leading into the first Easter mass. Many Protestant churches have also developed Easter Vigil services, based on the early celebrations we know from the second through the fifth centuries.

The concept of a vigil is based on the Jewish understanding of a day. The day begins at sundown, not at midnight. (Obviously, in a time before clocks, midnight would have been a totally artificial boundary.) Therefore, the Easter service begins on Saturday night and moves into Sunday. There is a service for Saturday listed in the lectionary that is not an Easter service, for congregations that wish to have worship but not an Easter service. This alternative continues the narrative of the passion, reading about the burial. The joy of the resurrection is left for the Sunday morning service.

The Easter Vigil assumes that there is a tie between Jesus' death and resurrection, the Exodus from Egypt, and our own baptism. In all three cases there is a dramatic action by God, beyond all human possibility, leading from an old life to a new one. The old enemies are defeated and life can now begin to be lived in a freedom not possible before. In the Exodus, bondage in Egypt ended when Moses led the people through the

water. At the cross, Jesus takes on the enemies—sin, death, and the power of evil. In the resurrection, his victory over all of these is shown. In baptism, we move from the old life in which sin, death, and evil held sway to a new life lived free from the power of these ancient foes. The transition is not complete, but a beginning has been made. Just as Israel had to learn much in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land, so we also are learning to live this new life while still living in the old world. It is only by faith that we know the truth of what has happened.

Easter is not a message that there is life after death, as though that was unheard of before Jesus. The Pharisees believed there would be a resurrection at the end of the age. The Greeks and others held to various understandings of an immortality that at least some humans already possessed. The Gospel agrees with the Pharisees that there is a resurrection at the end of the age, but then proclaims that the resurrection of Jesus is the dawning of the Kingdom, the Reign of God breaking into our old world.

The lessons for the Easter Vigil stress all of these things, bringing in images of water from creation on. Most baptisms were held at this service, so that the meaning was clear that in baptism we die with Christ in order to rise also with him–not simply after our physical death, but even now, with his risen life, we are enabled to begin living in the new age. Since most Christians are no longer baptized on Easter Eve, a ceremony of the renewal of the congregation's baptismal vows traditionally occurs here. It includes the renunciation of the powers of darkness and a turning to the light of Christ. If the whole Lenten period has stressed the meaning of our baptism and its relationship to Christ's death and resurrection, then the renewal of baptismal vows can be a very important part of the Easter celebration.

The Gospel reading for the Easter Vigil service as well as the Easter morning service is Matthew 28:1-10, the account of the resurrection and Jesus' appearance to the women. On Sunday morning it is paired with a passage from Colossians that calls us to live as those who have been raised with Christ. If communion is celebrated on Sunday morning or immediately after the Vigil, then clearly it cannot be a stress on the cross but rather the resurrection as a victory over the cross. Finally, if there is a communion service on Sunday evening, the Emmaus Road passage from Luke 24 is used. It is the risen Lord who is made known to the disciples in the breaking of bread.

Conclusion

The preacher, perhaps along with a worship committee, needs to do coherent planning for the entire season from Ash Wednesday through Easter. If there are to be several communion services, thought should be given to how they will each relate to the particular part of the season. If there are to be baptisms or confirmations, these also need to be placed where they help illumine the season. Finally, the movement from death to new life needs to be made crystal clear. Dedication to living in the new age made possible by Christ's resurrection is the culmination of the season. There can be no such new life without the concomitant dying to the old. How the congregation as a whole makes this movement is the goal of the planning.