

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 the 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—as is the very inclination that urges us to pray.

Thus, in preparation for Lent, the preacher's private reading might be a review of the theology of grace. A recent book I would recommend is, 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 first two Sundays we hear Mark's version of Jesus' sojourn in the desert and his Transfiguration account. The next three Sundays give choices for the Gospel readings. The readings are taken from Cycle A if there are candidates for baptism and the "scrutinies" are celebrated. They may also be chosen because of their strong emphasis on Christian initiation, something even the "old-timers" need to hear over and over. On the third Sunday, the account of the Samaritan woman has "living water" as its core symbol, while the man born blind (Fourth Sunday) receives his sight after washing at the pool. The story of Lazarus (Fifth Sunday) 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 calls for preparation for initiation, for some; and for all, penance and reconciliation in the light of the new life we have received in Baptism.

The SOURCEBOOK FOR SUNDAYS AND SEASONS 1998, (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 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.

Connected to the water imagery in the Lenten readings are themes of thirst and desert. Remember that, like Jesus, 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, but God has taken pity and walks among us and calls us to the pool of living water that opens our eyes (the Fourth Sunday's Gospel, A cycle). 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.

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 (Notre Dame Center for Pastoral Liturgy) and those of W.A. Ward which follow, will help the preacher address a practice that can draw us all to our senses.

FASTING AND FEASTING

LENT should be more than a time for fasting. It should also be a joyous season of feasting.

LENT is a time to fast FROM certain things and to feast ON others. It is a season in which we should:

FAST from judging others; FEAST on the Christ within them.

FAST from emphasis on differences; FEAST on the unity of life.

FAST from apparent darkness; FEAST on the reality of lights.

FAST from thoughts of illness; FEAST on the healing power of God.

FAST from words that pollute; FEAST on phrases that purify.
FAST from discontent; FEAST on gratitude.
FAST from anger; FEAST on patience.
FAST from pessimism; FEAST on optimism.
FAST from worry; FEAST on divine-order. Trust in God.
FAST from complaining; FEAST on appreciation.
FAST from negatives; FEAST on affirmatives.
FAST from unrelenting pressures; FEAST on unceasing prayer.
FAST from hostility; FEAST on non-resistance.
FAST from bitterness; FEAST on forgiveness.
FAST from self-concern; FEAST on compassion for others.
FAST from personal anxiety; FEAST on eternal Truth.
FAST from discouragement; FEAST on hope.
FAST from facts that depress; FEAST on verities that uplift.
FAST from lethargy; FEAST on enthusiasm.
FAST from suspicion; FEAST on truth.
FAST from thoughts that weaken; FEAST on promises that inspire.
FAST from shadows of sorrow; FEAST on the sunlight of serenity.
FAST from idle gossip; FEAST on purposeful silence.
FAST from problems that overwhelm; FEAST on prayer that undergirds.

Some Practical Ways to Approach a Holy Fast

Look at fasting, and all the ways in which you re-examine that discipline, not as punishment but as a service to your body---to its good. The body is good and worthy because of the mystery of the incarnation: God's flesh-taking among us has made all flesh, all earthly things holy.

Look at fasting not as denial of the flesh or a degradation of fleshly hungers, but as leading to the enhancement of our earthly joys. The Talmud says: "One will have to give account on the Judgement Day of every good thing which one might have enjoyed--and did not."

See fasting as necessary to the enhancement of the feast. A good appetite allows us to enjoy the earthly gifts we were given. We need to learn to be deeply joyful as much as we need to learn healthy, constructive suffering.

Fast from instant gratifications. Take a moment to reexamine cravings and hungers, yearnings, compulsions, and impulses as natural and right--but in need of being fed at the right level.

Examine your diet and resolve to make the necessary changes if it is not healthy. Examine your eating habits and change them if you eat impulsively, constantly, alone, too fast, unconsciously or without savoring your food, with disinterest, without care or dignity.

Eat only when seated at a table. Try not to eat alone but find someone to share your meal with. Companion means the one you share your bread with. Invite the lonely. Bring a meal to a shut-in. Volunteer in a soup kitchen.

Return a sense of the sacramental to mealtime in your household. Present all meals with dignity. Take at least forty-five minutes to eat your dinner. (The average American family eats a whole meal in Five minutes!)

If you have a family, discuss these Lenten exercises with them. Make your Lenten practices an exercise in mutual support and solidarity.

Learn to cook and serve the foods the poor eat. Tasty and healthful meals can be made from lentils, rice, grains, and legumes which, eaten together, offer all the protein you need. You may want to invest in a simple Indian or Mexican cookbook.

Try vegetarian meals. If we eat the grains instead of feeding them to the cattle, we can save the beasts caught in the middle--and also save the forests that are cut down to make grasslands for cattle!

Make a Lenten collection box to set on the table. Label it: "The Fasts of the Rich are the Feasts of the Poor." The money you save by eating sparingly, not dining out, foregoing meats, can be graphically transferred into alms.

Begin planning or planting a vegetable garden or herb patch. Growing tending, harvesting, sharing and eating your own produce brings us down to earth and is often a healing experience.

If you have no difficulties with your meals or mealtime and food is not a neurotic issue with you, consider other ways of "fasting." During Lent we ask ourselves: What does my baptism cost me?" Surely it asks us to "fast from our sinful behaviors."

Fast from guzzling gas. Drive the speed limit. Ride public transportation. Ride a

bike or walk when you can.

Fast from compulsive consumerism. Check your closets, cupboards, storage rooms and garage. How many items have you collected that you thought you needed---until you got them home and had "buyer's remorse?"

In reparation, choose some of these areas in your house to clean out. Fix, clean and deliver these items to those who need them more than you do.

Examine the ways in which you consume and waste, using up nature's resources and adding to landfills or air/water pollution. Shorten your showers. Save the warm-up water for your garden. Eat your leftovers at the next meal. Recycle religiously. Refuse to use plastic. Use your own shopping sack. Write on both sides of your paper or recycle your paper as scratch pads. Lower your thermostat or air-conditioner. Wear a sweater, add a blanket--or take them off.

Find ways to volunteer in your neighborhood or parish. Every neighborhood has its poor and lonely. Visit the sick. Cook for the old or the homeless. Work for children's rights and education. Build dwellings for the homeless. Write letters to politicians for peace and justice, and for the conservation of the earth's resources.

(I do not know the original source for these two suggestions for Fasting.)

Leo, Bishop of Rome, once wrote:

The sum total of our fasting does not consist in merely abstaining from food. In vain do we deny our body food if we do not withhold our heart from wickedness and restrain our lips so that they speak no evil. We must so moderate our rightful use of food that our other desires may be subject to the same rule. They therefore who desire to do good works, let them not fear that they shall be without the means: since even for given two pennies, the generosity of the poor widow of the Gospel was glorified!

-from ASSEMBLY, (Notre Dame Center for Pastoral Liturgy) January, 1993

Some additional sources for your Lenten preaching and reflection:

Gabe Huck's, THE THREE DAYS: PARISH PRAYER IN THE PASCHAL TRIDUUM. (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publication, 1981.

"Easter's Fifty Days," LITURGY: JOURNAL OF THE LITURGICAL CONFERENCE, (vol. 3, no.1) (Washington: The Liturgical Conference).

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