



“The Lamb Who Was Slain Has Begun His Reign. Amen!”* Texts from the Revelation to John for the Sundays of Easter

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I find that Holy Week is draining; no matter how many times I have lived through his crucifixion, my anxiety about his resurrection is undiminished—I am terrified that, this year, it won't happen; that, that year, it didn't. Anyone can be sentimental about the Nativity; any fool can feel like a Christian at Christmas. But Easter is the main event; if you don't believe in the resurrection, you're not a believer.

“IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE IN EASTER,” Owen Meany said, “DON'T KID YOURSELF—DON'T CALL YOURSELF A CHRISTIAN.”

John Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*

The words of Owen Meany may sound shrill to our very sensitized ears, but they are no more blunt than the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 or the words of the Revelation to John. The Easter season is the time to shout out the name of the risen and reigning and returning Lord Jesus, and presenting these texts to the congregation is a splendid way to do it.¹

*This article was written following a conversation with Pastor Stephanie Frey, First Lutheran Church, St. James, Minnesota; Pastor Michael Lockerby, Holden Lutheran Church, Kenyon, Minnesota; and Professors Wendell Frerichs and Roy Harrisville, Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary.

¹In his lectures on preaching, Dietrich Bonhoeffer speaks about his hermeneutic of “presentation.” See Bonhoeffer, *Worldly Preaching: Lectures on Homiletics*, ed. and tr. Clyde E. Fant (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

I. RECONTEXTUALIZING THESE TEXTS

There is no such thing as a noncontextualized text in the Bible. There is no timeless spiritual saying, no spaceless moral teaching. There is no naked kerygma, no unclothed declaration of forgiveness. There is no evocative narrative native to the eternal human soul, no all-purpose prophetic utterance to make well every human malady.

If the good news of and about the enfleshed word is going to be proclaimed through the presentation of a biblical text, that word and its enfleshment will have to be struggled with, no matter what text is presented. And every preacher knows how very difficult that is. It is never a matter of first “interpreting” the text and then, leaving the text behind, “applying” it. The task is so to present the text that it will be burned into the hearts and minds of the hearers. Since, as Luther says, the Bible is that cradle which bears the Christ, the properly presented text will

present Jesus the Christ to those who gather to hear.

The text is thus always in context and is as inseparable from context as the word is inseparable from the flesh of Jesus (the ubiquity of the incarnate Christ). The task of presenting a text necessarily involves the attempt to examine the context in which the text was contextualized then and there, and to recontextualize that text by allowing it to invade the context of the here and the now.²

It is never easy, and the recontextualization of these texts from the Revelation to St. John seems to offer almost insurmountable difficulties, particularly to the preacher who is exhausted after the rigors of the Lenten season. Yet there are many reasons why these texts should not be ignored. Chief among these reasons is that the texts shout out loudly and clearly the Easter message of Jesus as the crucified, risen, reigning, and returning Lord. The texts are designated, after all, for the Easter season. And Easter is not just a day. It is a season.

II. ENCOURAGING ONE ANOTHER TO PRESENT THESE TEXTS

Not everyone is enthusiastic about this book of the Bible. Luther says, "My spirit cannot accommodate itself to this book. For me this is reason enough not to think highly of it: Christ is neither taught nor known in it."³ It is also clear that the enthusiasm which some Christian groups have for this book is not shared by most readers of *Word & World*. The original context seems difficult to understand. Our present context seems far removed. The task of recontextualizing these texts seems too discouraging. Yet pastors who are preachers should encourage one another to present these texts.

One reason is that in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (or in a similar lectionary) cycle C of the Sundays of Easter is the only place where any texts from Revelation appear (except for St. Michael's Day and All Saints' Day). If this opportunity is not grasped, it is unlikely that members of the congregation will hear any texts from this book presented from their own pulpit. The inevitable result is that they will conclude that some parts of the Bible are not worth much or, even worse, they will

²James Burtness, "To Re-contextualize the Text," *dialog* 13 (1974) 208-212.

³Martin Luther, "Preface to the Revelation of St. John [1], 1522," *Luther's Works*, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960) 398-99.

conclude that this book is specifically being avoided because it says things which their own pastor does not want them to hear. One can hear about these texts, of course, from listening to friends in other Christian groups, or on any day of the week by turning the radio dial or the TV channel selector. Pastors who are unhappy about what members of the congregation pick up from these other sources ought not miss the opportunity to present these texts themselves.

Another reason to present these texts is that it is difficult to imagine a better opportunity to make clear the fact that the one message of the Bible comes through a rich diversity of literary genres. There is only one word. But that one word comes to us not only through many different words but through many different kinds of words. If poetry is read as though it were narrative history, if the parables of Jesus are read as though they were allegories, if the polemical arguments of Paul are taken to be the quiet reflections of a systematic theologian, everything is lost.

So also, if apocalyptic literature is read as though it were a collection of coded predictions about the movements of kingdoms and empires in the final years of the twentieth century, then the word will never be heard through these words. If, on the other hand, those who gather to hear can hear the word as these apocalyptic words pour over them during the Sundays of Easter, they will be prepared to recognize other kinds of words in other texts throughout the church year.

Further, we need today to be filled with hope as did those early Christians who first read these words. If these are not quite apocalyptic times, the complexities and difficulties of life on this planet in these days are so enormous that they at least approach apocalyptic proportions. We need to be filled with hope.

The temptation is to react to our times with cynicism or naivete, rather than with hope. Cynicism seeks to avoid the struggle by declaring the whole situation hopeless. It declares that there can be no saving of this world which is sliding into inevitable decline, that only individuals can be saved from and out of this world. Naivete seeks to avoid the struggle by declaring all problems solvable if only others will listen to the solution offered by the speaker. Whether through angry demands for the immediate liberation of the oppressed or through blind optimism in the mechanisms of the free market, the naive reaction oversimplifies the complexities. We need to be filled with that hope which looks reality in the eye and does not flinch, that hope which rejects both cynicism and naivete. These texts are full of such hope because they shout out the crucified and risen Lord Jesus.

Finally, we should encourage one another to present these texts because in this Easter season they allow us to proclaim without apology or qualification that Jesus is the risen and reigning and returning Lord. It is not only appropriate but necessary that after the weeks of Lent we take time to celebrate the Sundays of Easter.

Through a strange misunderstanding of the phrase “theology of the cross,” impulses have appeared throughout our churches that tend to equate resurrection proclamation with a “theology of glory” and genuine signs of Christian hope with “triumphalism.” The apostle Paul, the first great theologian of the cross, was certain that if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is in vain and our faith is in vain (1 Cor 15:14). When on Easter morning Orthodox Christians shout out to one another and to the world “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!” they are simply making certain that this event, without which there would be no Christian faith or

Christian church, is never forgotten. That same conviction is shouted out in every one of these texts. Preachers need to preach it and hearers need to hear it.

III. CLOTHING THESE TEXTS FOR PRESENTATION

There is no such thing as a naked text. The question is never whether the presented text will be clothed. It is a question of how it will be clothed. Clothing texts for presentation is another way of talking about recontextualization. The difficulties encountered when clothing these texts from Revelation ought not to be underestimated.

But the difficulties ought not to be overestimated either. It has already been stated that our times bristle with problems of apocalyptic proportions, from the ozone layer to the AIDS virus and everything in between. A glance at any newspaper makes it clear that we are not, in fact, so far removed from those Christians at the end of the first century A.D. who first read these words

from the Revelation to John.

The literary genre seems at first to be so foreign to us. It is a parade of what appear to be strange, even weird, images. There are wild beasts and mixtures of wild beasts that exist nowhere but in the mind of the one who sees them. The sights and sounds are rarely harmonious or satisfying. They strain the eyes and hurt the ears. There are animals which are inanimate, numbers which do not enumerate, streets on which no one has ever walked, and buildings in which no person has ever lived. Most of us are not automatically attracted to this literature.

Yet every Christian who has taken even a survey course of the Bible knows something about apocalyptic literature. Study Bibles readily available, such as *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, have brief and helpful essays. Almost three fourths of the verses in the Revelation contain either direct quotations or allusions to Old Testament passages. It does not take long to realize that this material is not as strange as it first appears.

One set of contexts, then, to which to go to recontextualize these texts is comprised of the apocalyptic proportions of our current plagues and perils. A second source from which to clothe these texts is the nature of apocalyptic literature in the Bible and in the extensive use made of Old Testament references by this writer. A third set of contexts for the clothing of these texts lies in the worship life of our congregations, which is rich in references and allusions to passages in Revelation. This ought to be no surprise, since the material is essentially hymnic and liturgical and sacramental in form and content. A colleague says, "Revelation is not given to us to interpret, but to sing!" And so we do.

This is the feast of victory for our God. Alleluia. Worthy is Christ, the Lamb who was slain, whose blood set us free to be people of God. Power and riches and wisdom and strength, and honor and blessing and glory are his....Blessing and honor and glory and might be to God and the Lamb forever. Amen. This is the feast of victory for our God, for the Lamb who was slain has begun his reign. Alleluia. (*Lutheran Book of Worship*, 81-82).

It is not difficult to weave these texts in and out of the hymns and liturgies of our congregations.

Attending to historical and contemporary contexts and to the nature of apocalyptic literature and its place in the family of literary genres in the Bible and

to the connections between this book and the worship life of our congregations may serve to make these texts less strange. Then also, the use of imagistic expression in our public life may help to clothe these texts for presentation.

If the preacher has some interest in art, it is not difficult to move from the more photographic paintings of the Flemish artists (e.g., Rembrandt) to the impressionists (everyone knows van Gogh), and from there to Picasso in his later periods or to Marc Chagall. An attempt to express reality in what appears to be very distorted forms may at certain times and places be a more accurate portrayal of reality than an attempt to be photographic with oil and canvas.

Does the preacher read literature? Think for a moment about what could be done by weaving in and out of one another the Revelation to John and the stories of Flannery O'Connor.

What about film? Anyone who saw *Apocalypse Now* and has read the Revelation to John cannot avoid seeing the comparisons in genre. (It would help to read Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.) Or what about music? Anyone who can talk about and appreciate the move from the regularities of Bach to the wild imagistic pounding of the senses from today's rock concerts can certainly understand the difference between narrative and apocalyptic literature in the Bible. Or spend an hour watching MTV. Or pay attention to the style of TV commercials. The imagistic expressions of our current culture are not, in style at least, so far removed from the imagistic expressions of the apocalyptic literature of the latter part of the first century A.D. Once it is recognized that the encounter with nonlinear high impact material is not entirely unknown to those in the pew, the search for materials with which to clothe these texts becomes easier, even more enjoyable.

It may be the time to bring out an overhead projector and to place on a large screen in the chancel Picasso's "Guernica," his famous apocalyptic work done after the first saturation bombing of a civilian site in the Spanish Civil War. Or think about what could be done with an overhead projector and the woodcuts on Revelation texts done by Luther's contemporary Albrecht Dürer. Or how about interspersing the words of the preacher's sermon with the sounds of segments of Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" from the *Messiah*? If texts from Revelation bring to mind themes such as image, imagination, creativity, artistic expression, then the decision to present these texts ought not to be a burden, but rather a great joy, liberating the preacher to take some risks, to do something slightly dangerous, perhaps even to clothe the words from the pulpit with sights and sounds from former and current times.

IV. REVELATION TEXTS FOR THE SUNDAYS OF EASTER

The primary problem for the preacher when considering these texts for presentation is to get over the initial fright or distaste which often accompanies the first new encounter with the Revelation to John. If the preacher finds the initial section of this article inviting and persuasive, the rest should go smoothly. It may even be fun. It will certainly be memorable both for the one in the pulpit and for those in the pew.

There are abundant resources. The best thing to do is purchase the recent commentary by Gerhard Krodel, *Revelation*, in the Augsburg New Testament series. The work by G. B. Caird in the Black's New Testament Commentaries series,

The Revelation of St. John the Divine, is still splendidly reliable and readable. The same is true of classic pieces such as those by Hans Lilje, *The Last Book of the Bible*; Thomas Torrance, *The Apocalypse Today*; D. T. Niles, *As Seeing the Invisible*; and the short work by Ronald Preston and Anthony Hanson, *The Revelation of Saint John the Divine*. Important background material can be found in *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* by Paul D. Hanson. If the preacher is not aware of the phenomenon of dispensationalism and the way in which this position is built into the Scofield Reference Bible, it would be a good idea to read some treatment of it, such as *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism: Its Historical Genesis and Ecclesiastical Implications* by Clarence Bass. These are only suggestions. Many preachers will be able to work just with the text and their own creative imagination.

The following are possible sermon titles, simply to start the process of pursuing the

presentation of these texts.

EASTER 2 REVELATION 1:4-18—KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS!
EASTER 3 REVELATION 5:11-14—YEA GOD!
EASTER 4 REVELATION 7:9-17—WASHED IN THE BLOOD OF THE LAMB!
EASTER 5 REVELATION 21:1-5—ALL THINGS NEW!
EASTER 6 REVELATION 21:10-14, 22-23—FACE TO FACE!

Yes. Present these texts. Bum them into the hearts and minds and memories of those to whom you preach. Proclaim the risen and reigning and returning Lord Jesus in such a way that every Lord's Day will be a reminder of the Day of the Lord.