



The Lenten First Lessons*

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The Old Testament lessons in the Lenten season provide five stories of God's dealings with his friends. But this is a different sort of friendship. Established by the self-bestowing promise of God, it guarantees no exemptions. In fact, going by the lessons, its only guarantee is continued education in what Luther used to call "God's idiom," a way of speaking and thus acting in which grace happens in the midst of suffering, power occurs in weakness and resurrection brings forth the dead.

Both aspects of the idiom are clearly evident in the Lenten lessons. God's promise is declared in each of them so that there can be no doubt about the friendship. In Genesis 22:1-18, Abraham, the original friend of God and fountainhead of the people of the promise, learns again that God will provide. His grandson Jacob hears the promise renewed in Genesis 28:1-17 as he sleeps with his head against the stone. The delivery of the commandments in Exodus 20:1-17 is, as we are repeatedly reminded nowadays, another manifestation of the grace of God. In Numbers 21:4-9, the people of the Hebrews are delivered from the fiery serpents. And on the fifth Sunday of Lent, Jeremiah sets forth one of the most promising texts of the Scripture, ringing out God's declaration that "...I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

But there is another aspect of the idiom, or another dimension of the friendship, apparent in these texts as well. No amount of familiarity with the story can dull the fact that Abraham gets his instruction in the First Commandment as his knife is poised over the child of his old age, the son of the promise, innocent Isaac. Similarly, Jacob's dream occurs while he is on the run from Esau, having left his family and goods on Rebekah's pretext to get away. The commandments are given to a people in the grip of a fear that drives them to idolatry. According to Numbers 21:6, the snakes he delivered them from were sent by the Lord himself in reprisal for the people's continual griping. And Jere-

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miah's grace-filled declaration is delivered to a long shattered and scattered people.

What kind of God is this? Like an eagerly interested friend, he insists upon bestowing himself freely, unconditionally; with nothing held back. But then when the suffering begins, he

apparently holds back, allowing those whom he loves to go on what seem for all the world to be self-guided tours of misery. It is as Luther said,¹

Reducing man to nothing, giving him up to death, and afflicting him with disasters and troubles without number—this is not playing is it? It is a game of a cat with a mouse, and this is the death of the mouse. Accordingly, these things are written in order that we may understand the counsel of the divine Wisdom and the wonderful way in which the saints are led. This appears to be so sad and bitter that the spectators—angels, devils, and the world—think that we have been devoured and destroyed. Indeed, we ourselves think that we have been deserted, despised and cast off. This is indeed the source of the word (Ps. 31:22)—“I am driven far from thy sight”—and again (Ps. 44:23)—“Why sleepest thou, O Lord? Awake!”

If this combination of an unconditional commitment with continuing jeopardy is “the counsel of divine wisdom,” “the wonderful way in which the saints are led,” there is good reason for some question about the leadership!

But acknowledging the question, hanging on as it is raised by texts like these, we ourselves—called to be proclaimers of this word—may encounter something different, something hidden deep within the ordinary. We may hear once again a gospel that goes further than a generalized policy of tolerance. And we may experience, at the hands of these texts, one of the rarest of events, actual repentance. There is no guarantee of this, of course, and there may be plenty of justification for trying to avoid it. But the gospel of these texts is the word of Good Friday and Easter, where the idiom is finally opened. And thus it is a word for Lent as for every season.

I. GENESIS 22:1-18 ABRAHAM AND ISAAC

Like a geological formation shaped by centuries of erosion, the story of Abraham and Isaac is worn smooth by countless generations of retelling. Nothing is left but the bedrock of the narrative—all the extras, a comment on Abraham’s relief, for instance, or Isaac’s return, have been worn away and the story develops itself in such a way that it takes hold and won’t let go.

What on earth possessed Abraham that he became convinced he had to sacrifice Isaac? What moved him to the point where he was ready to carry out the conviction? And what kind of God is it who after more than a normal lifetime’s worth of delay in fulfillment of a promise, demands the fulfillment back again, only to relent in the last moment?

Working historically, critics have attempted to move behind the text. The time-worn form of the narrative indicates that it is a very old story which circulated independently before finding its current place. It has been argued, accord-

¹Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works* (55 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-76) 7.225.

ingly, that the story developed in relation to Canaanite child sacrifices. It has been further suggested that the story was told to justify sacrificing animals as opposed to children, perhaps reflecting a transition in the practice of the sacrificial cultus.

While such an exposition may appear defensible in a preliminary reading, it effectively

nullifies the scandal of the text. That may not be accidental, at least as historical criticism is currently practiced. In what Edmund Smits, late professor of church history at Luther Seminary, once characterized as our “remarkably shallow view of the world,” some sociological or psycho-historical observation obliterates the otherness of the story. It wouldn’t be worth all the re-telling if it were simply justification for a change in rubrics!

It is also suggested that the text is devoted to Abraham’s obedience. Again, some features of the story support this reading. It is set out in 22:1 as God testing Abraham. And in verse 12, it is Abraham’s obedience that is commended: “Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son from me.” Undoubtedly, this is obedience and of a calibre seldom witnessed. The point of the text would then be the radical obedience demanded of Abraham and by implication, all of the children of the promise.

There are at least a couple of problems with making this the overall reading of the text, however. The demand on Abraham is reduced to deception, as though God were merely pretending. And in the end, Abraham gets off the hook. Accordingly, a sermon following this interpretation of the story would have to conclude that if you gave yourself radically, like Abraham, God will find a way to reduce the terms! And then it is just another instance of cheap grace, or at least, cheaper grace.

What is the point of the text, then? What would happen if there were no point, no meaning that could be distilled out into a sentence or two? There is something in the narrative itself that resists every attempt to boil it down further, making such attempts appear tawdry. That was Luther’s experience with it. Though he spoke with admiration of Abraham’s faith and his obedience, Luther commented concerning the story as a whole, “I certainly admit my dullness; my donkey remains standing below and cannot ascend the mountain.”² Maybe then it’s not so surprising that the same thing happens to the rest of us as well.

But what if that’s what is supposed to happen? The story cannot be reduced to a platitude —“have confidence, in all of your trials, God will provide”—for there is something in it that registers more deeply. In this story as in the daily life of the saints, both the promise itself and that which contradicts it stand together. To talk with students, to visit in congregations, simply to live, is to be confronted again and again with the seemingly ineradicable force of suffering. And yet it is also to hear, again and again, of how people have been sustained and carried precisely in the midst of such apparently promiseless times. It is a game of the cat with the mouse, the death of the mouse, and yet it is the mouse who tells of it.

So the point of the story is no point at all but the story itself. It cannot be

²*LW* 4.118.

reduced to its pulp—it has simply to be told, and again. It is the desolate cry of Good Friday and the declaration of an Easter that brings Good Friday to an end without denying or destroying the reality of it.

II. GENESIS 28:10-17 JACOB AND THE ANGEL

If all the Bible-campers and others who have climbed it looked at the scriptural traffic on Jacob’s ladder, they might be a little less aggressive about jumping aboard. Maybe the good Lord

should have posted it, “Angels Only.” But it probably wasn’t a ladder anyway.

Historical-critical studies provide some helpful details concerning this text. Linguistically, the word that is translated “ladder” is used only once in the Old Testament. The verb and other similar constructions suggest that what appeared in Jacob’s dream was not a ladder or a stairway but a mound or a ramp, on the order of the construction at Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). The evidence is strong enough to lead a good share of Old Testament scholars to the conclusion that the “high places” inveighed against by the prophets are implicit in the text. If so, Jacob laid down to sleep in a pagan holy place.

But the proceedings in Jacob’s dream are a different matter. There is no sacrifice, no attempt at appeasement. God has all the action here. The angels, God’s messengers, ascend and descend upon the ramp or mound, and the Lord himself appears either above Jacob or alongside of him to declare the word of promise. The promise includes land, descendants and continuing protection through all the wanderings that will follow.

If Jacob’s dream took place on an old Canaanite worship site or included one, the events of the dream have transformed it. Only the angels can ascend and descend. And when God comes down, he does so to take charge of Jacob’s future. So Jacob can only declare, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (v. 19).

The verses that immediately follow bring out at least one purpose of the text. It is an etiology involving Bethel, a northern sanctuary important in the later history of Israel. But where does that leave the preacher?

One way to proceed would be to take a clue from some of the contemporary commentators and many of the older ones, moving to the overall narrative. What has happened to Jacob? Having deprived his brother of his birthright, he has connived with his mother to obtain blind Isaac’s blessing as well. And now Jacob lives with the consequences. Esau has exposed the fraud to Isaac and is making plans to kill Jacob; Rebekah has discovered the plot and found a way of escape, sending Jacob to seek a wife among her own people. But now he wanders. He has the birthright and the blessing but no land, nothing to take with him, no future in his own home. Blessed, he is dispossessed and on an errand to a family he doesn’t know.

In this context, the text begins to take on a familiar sound. It is God’s idiom again, that combination of an unconditional promise with unconditional jeopardy. God won’t allow any human traffic up the mound—he insists on taking care of that himself. So Jacob has a word to go by, something to count on, even if it came to him in his dreams. But from here on, his life will be a cycle of disasters—conflict with his father-in-law, a beloved wife who is barren, one son

who whores, another who is incestuous, a daughter who is raped, a son reported dead but sold into slavery, famine, another favorite son exposed to threat. It is an incredible litany of disasters, death in the midst of life. But it is a promise of life for the dead at the same time.

III. EXODUS 20:1-17 THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

For all of the exegetical problems posed by the decalog, the more important issue in preaching on this text may be the theological one. How does a preacher of grace alone approach the Ten Commandments?

The traditional approach, at least among recent generations of Lutherans, is a curious

aberration of the law-gospel distinction. The commandments are set out to show the impossibility of keeping them and then grace is offered as the remedy which makes it possible to live without them. The net effect is to simply ignore them.

It has been objected against this, and rightly, that such treatment disregards the biblical context of the commandments in both Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 6. Here the commandments are gifts of redemption, a gracious bequeathal given in the course of release from bondage.

But there is something suspicious about the objection, at least as it is often presented. For while it is clear that the declaration of the First Commandment renders all of them a gift of grace, this grace is by no means immunity to disaster. In fact, if anything the very graciousness of the commandments simply underscores the rebellion they evoke.

This is already clear in the narrative framework of the text. When the story finally resumes in Exodus 32, the people are upset by Moses' extended absence and insist that Aaron make them a golden calf to worship. Better idolatry than those ten words! And when the Lord informs Moses of this, he declares his intention to destroy the whole lot and start over with Moses himself (32:9-10). Moses has to redeem the people from God's wrath, talking him out of it!

It is God's idiom again, his wonderful way of leading the saints. For there is a graciousness about the commandments. They make explicit what is implicit in everyday life, bringing to hearing the fundamental requirements of life as a human being. In order to live as a creature, it is necessary to fear, love and trust your Creator, to use his name properly and listen to what he has to say. And in order to live among other people, it is necessary to observe some elementary human requirements—to honor parents, protect life and its genesis, to respect property, the communication among neighbors and the trust necessary to community life.

These requirements, love of God and the neighbor, hold for believers and unbelievers alike. They are no mere pretext set out to drive us to something better. If they are disregarded, the consequences follow. There is life in these words.

But in sin, that which is gracious and life giving simply compounds the rebellion and the disasters that follow. The hope of Easter is that there will be a day when the commandments are heard for all the promise in the first one, simply as gift. Until then, they remain a Good Friday. So they must be preached idiomatically for both the grace and the death that is in them.

IV. NUMBERS 21:4-9 THE ATTACKING SERPENTS

The bone-weariness that strikes the people in verse 4 of this text sounds similar to what happens to preachers about this time in Lent, at least those who haven't given the whole thing over to Lenten dramas. According to the Hebrew, the people were more than impatient—they were short of breath, running out of the stamina necessary to their wilderness wanderings, utterly discouraged. And they had no post-Easter respite a few weeks ahead of them.

Once again, it is possible to peel back some of the historical layers of the text. Undoubtedly, snakes must have been a threat to nomads tracking aimlessly between Egypt and Canaan. There was a common belief, underlying 1 Samuel 6:1-5 as well, that images of such vermin could provide protection against them. And according to 2 Kings 18:4 there was a bronze serpent in the temple at Jerusalem, allegedly the very one Moses had made, that was called "Nehushtan."

Hezekiah destroyed it, for which he is commended. Accordingly, it would be easy to give this text the slip. It smacks of magic. And if it was a story told to justify the presence of a graven image in the temple, Hezekiah and company clearly found the practice involved idolatrous. If the historical sense of the text is confined to the school of the facts and nothing but, the text is a dead end.

But the Elohist, the apparent editor of the text, and St. Paul put this story in a different context, more helpful to the preacher. There is something petulant about the people's murmurings—even supernatural food is now revolting. But who can blame them for their discouragement? In God's idiom, hope contends continually with hopelessness and faith seems to have a magnet's head for its opposite, sheer unbelief.

In response to the complaints, God becomes both the enemy and the redeemer. The snakes run loose against the people in punishment. God does not take them away, but leaves the threat in force. At the same time, he provides release in the form of the bronze serpent Moses erects.

The Elohist, followed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:9-10, offers counsel to patience with this story. But along with Paul and John's Gospel (3:14-15), he also declares the hope that holds in the face of all that contradicts it. Christ deposes the idols, forcing even their discarded images to bear witness to his self-giving. He is the idiom.

V. JEREMIAH 31:31-34 THE NEW COVENANT

Even if the framers of the lectionary have placed this text in the last Sunday before Palm Sunday and Holy Week, it is full of Easter. But like the Easter texts themselves, while it shows us the future of God's friendship with us, it does so in the context of Good Friday.

The text carries us out of one set of wanderings and into another. Jeremiah's prophecy here is directed to the people of the northern kingdom, a century after their defeat at the hands of the Assyrians. By now, wandering is a permanent condition. For 100 years, these children of the promise have been cut off from all of its other connections. They are a colony of a pagan empire. There

is no viable manifestation of the deliverance which originally identified them as God's friends. Hope has not merely been contradicted—it has been shattered, so that there would be little or no good reason for even sifting through the remains.

Addressed to such a people, the text speaks a language brimming with tenderness. After promising to make a new covenant with both Judah and Israel, in verse 32 God invokes the old one. In it, he says, he had "become Israel's Lord," a reference to the First Commandment, or wedded himself to the people. The RSV uses the term "husband." The image of taking the people by the hand is in the same vein, calling up the picture of lovers or an attentive parent. The friendship was of such intimacy as to be beyond it.

The reference to the breaking of the covenant in verse 32 is treated like an historical artifact. Stated, it is underscored once but to point beyond itself to what is to come in verses 33 and following, the new covenant. Here too, the language is intimate, even more so. The law will no longer be an external power, imposed from without and thus exposing division within the self. It will be written on the heart in such a way that the two selves will become one, a new self who

in doing what comes naturally is what God intends.

Thus possessed by God, the people of the new covenant will no longer need preachers and teachers, not anymore than honeymooners need such assistance. The elect will know the Lord, the word “know” being used here in its fullest connotation. The noun form of the verb, *yadah* means “friend.” There is a sense of love in the term that carries with it the overtones of Adam and Eve’s knowing of one another.

As if in summary, verse 34 declares the promise of forgiveness. All that separates, all that has stood between the Creator and his creatures, will be destroyed “...for I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more.”

It would be trivializing to treat this text as a comparison of the Old Testament with the New, or of Judaism with Christianity. It is hard to imagine a believer hearing these words without hearing in them reference to Christ. Yet as the First Commandment itself shows, the law of the old covenant was never simply external. And we ourselves, Gentiles who have much in common with the people of the northern kingdom, know what it is to hear a law which attacks and exposes.

So the law has not ended yet, not in a permanent historical sense. It retains its force wherever it sounds its accusing voice, attacking the conscience, looming in threat over the future. It ends only in Christ, as he is raised in us, abolishing the old self to create a new one shaped after himself.

Until such a time as Christ is raised in us, Jeremiah’s text remains for us—as for the people who originally heard it—a word of hope. Easter and Good Friday are inseparable. The risen Christ bears his wounds. Until the new age drives the old into passing, God’s friendship with us will have the marks of the cross, and Lent, as any other day in the life of faith, will be a time of repentance. God’s idiom—his unqualified commitment in combination with his ruthless way of shaking his people right to the limit—exposed all of our attempts to make do without him even as it shows the way to the freedom it establishes in Christ.