



New Sight, New Life: Lenten Gospels

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The gospel texts for the Sundays of Lent, Series A, are from either Matthew or John.¹ Traditionally, they are some of the most well known passages of scripture. Now, in these latter days, when they are being preached every three years or so among the churches, it may be that their random telling of Christ’s journey to Jerusalem has produced confusion, if not tedium, about how it was that Jesus made it to Jerusalem to be crucified. When the group² gathered to discuss these lectionary passages—chosen almost thirty years ago now—some expressed a sense of weariness among pastors with the no longer so new texts, not because the texts themselves were old, but because the interpretations had become hackneyed and clichéd. Once surprising and fresh, the feminist interpretation, for example, of the Samaritan woman has been so bedraggled by its constant use as a text for women’s ordination services that it was difficult, at first, to engage with the story; the surprise of first experience had disappeared; and we all knew the path our speculation would take. The challenge became, then, one of letting the text surprise us yet again, as all great texts do.

Paul Martinson of Luther Seminary’s systematic theology department has written a fine piece for the faculty on the difference between the religions of surprise and those of discovery. Christianity is one of surprise, he argues, and

¹Editor’s note: The texts discussed here are those of the familiar Roman three-year lectionary (adapted), not those of the Revised Common Lectionary, which has been “authorized” for use in the ELCA beginning with Advent, 1995.

²Those who joined Prof. Grindal in discussing these texts were Pastors Stephanie Frey, Jimalee Jones, Nancy Koester, Meg Madson, and Kathleen Sukke.

surprises cannot be structured into a curriculum—or into the preparation of a sermon. An old surprise is no longer a surprise. This group of seasoned pastors speculated about whether it might not be interesting to preach on Matthew (or John) exclusively, throughout Lent, at both Sunday morning services and midweek Lenten services, to give our people a better sense for the actual structure—and maybe surprise—of one of the gospels and of Jesus’ life and death.

It is also important to note that it was not the texts that wearied the preachers; rather it was the treatment given them in the literature of the day, the curious refusal to go back to the text and see how it might evoke in the hearer something different from what it had evoked over the years. Those preachers who think they have found in a text the sweet meat of the gospel that will last for all time usually end up preaching the law unmercifully. Good preachers describe, as these

pastors did, how they struggle with a text until, for no reason or method they can describe, the Holy Spirit surprises them with a facet they had not seen before. It is like the glint from a facet of a jewel, which, quickly seen, suddenly is gone again, until the next time, when that earlier shining surprise and the view into the text it provided seem to yield nothing—like a flat, dull surface. Preachers need to read and refresh themselves in the word until it bursts forth with good news. If that does not happen, one of the group said, you might just as well drag out an old sermon. Furthermore, it is not the preacher who gives the word interest, as in the fashion designer draping an unattractive torso with clothes that try to hide what is really underneath, but it is the word itself which is of interest and power. If preachers have the illusion at any time that they are engaged in a project to dress up the word, so that people will finally hear it, they will be poorly rewarded. Getting people into the church building to hear the word preached is another issue, but once there these preachers all know that it is the word which does the work. One's hearers will perish of spiritual hunger if the preacher is preaching not the word of the Lord, but his or her own word, from which little sustenance can be had.

It was from such musings that we turned to the texts at hand.

First Sunday in Lent: Matthew 4:1-11

The story of the temptation of Christ in the desert has, of course, been treated by great writers through history. The most famous example is Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor, found in *The Brothers Karamozov*. Preachers worth their salt should pursue the profound insights of such a work as they prepare the sermon, but should not necessarily use it in the sermon. The temptation narrative is a marvelous story of how Christ struggled to remain obedient to his Father and do his Father's will. The passage shows us clearly how the devil works against God, to defeat Christ as he did Adam and Eve in the garden. But here his foe is the Lord himself. The most popular commentator, Jack Kingsbury (*Matthew as Story*, 1988), notes that here Jesus struggles, successfully, to maintain the hiddenness of God and to give humanity what the Grand Inquisitor calls the freedom to love or not love the Christ; since human beings forced to worship Christ would not be free, even if he had won them over by bread or miracles. In this event, the Grand

Inquisitor says, all of human history is brought together as Jesus faces the temptations of the wicked one to dominate the world and entice Christ away from his Father.

For many, the most distressing thing about the story of Christ's temptations is the way the devil quotes scripture with such fluidity and conviction. That Jesus knows enough to stand against the siren call of the great deceiver is a great comfort, on the one hand; on the other, it is disconcerting for us. How is it that we, who know considerably less scripture, are supposed to stand against such cunning? Luther's great hymn against the devil, "A Mighty Fortress," confesses that Jesus is the champion who fights on our behalf. Only one thing can fell the devil, and that is the word used rightly, the living word against the dead letter. Jesus is able to use scripture to confound the devil because he makes a more faithful use of it than the devil, the great deceiver himself. The devil uses the word to achieve a terrible end: to get Jesus to disobey his Father and throw all of creation into chaos. Christ's answer to the devil should cause us to tremble as we think of our own preaching, to wonder whether we ever try to make bread out of

stones. It is the devil's work which we are about when and if we try to stretch these texts to fit our own druthers. What struck me as I was talking to these now seasoned pastors was how awesome it is to preach, especially as one is bound by the ordination oath to remain faithful to the confessions of one's church.

Do we as preachers take Old Nick's suggestion that it might be okay to make bread out of stones? The stone image intrigued the group as a theme for a series of sermons on Matthew. The words *lithos* and *petra*, stone and rock, seem crucially set into the Matthean mind, like precious jewels whose meaning always intrigues but eludes. As Jesus is once asked to change stones to bread, he later ponders whether a father would give his son stones for bread (Matt 7:9). The devil tempts him to fall down upon the stones and claim the promise that his foot will not be dashed upon the stone; Jesus later says, in 21:42, that the stone which the builder rejected will become the cornerstone and that whoever falls on it will be broken, and those on whom the stone falls will be broken to powder.

As Jesus looks at the temple, in 24:2, and announces that not one stone of it will be left upon another, it is not difficult to think ahead to Peter's notion that we are "living stones" (1 Pet 2:5) or that Peter (*petros*) is a rock. The rock is the clue to life in the wandering of the Israelites in the desert, the rock which gave birth, flowing with milk and honey, or the rock which being struck flowed with water, but caused Moses to miss the promised land. Is it not significant that the stone which keeps Jesus in the tomb (a quarry)-surely a rock flowing with milk and honey, a place from which the food of salvation comes-is rolled away by the power of the resurrection (Matt 27:60; 28:2)? Nor can one forget that during the earthquake the rocks were split open and the graves gave up their dead (27:51-52). Do we not look to that rock from which our salvation was dug (Isa 51:1)?

Furthermore, the admonition of Jesus that we should store up treasures in heaven, where moths and rust do not corrupt and thieves cannot break in and steal (Matt 6:19-20), is also intriguing when one thinks of the fact that the Son of Man

comes like a thief in the night to take us, his treasures (24:43-44). It is interesting that the Jews set up a guard outside the tomb (carved into a rock) so that no one would roll away the stone, steal the body, and claim that Jesus had kept the miracle (27:64-66). In fact, at the very end of Matthew, the guards are told by the high priests that they should take money (treasures) and lie about the resurrection, saying that the disciples came by night and stole the body, so that the secret of the resurrection could be stolen from the young church (28:11-15). This use of stones and rocks may stretch things a bit, but it does have the power to intrigue with the way it recalls the history of salvation. It is just such a set of images and events that could open up the Gospel of Matthew anew. There are, of course, strong shades of Moses in these images, and it is entirely within the tradition of interpretation, especially Daniel Brunner's, that the image of Jesus as Moses is supported very handily by the stones and rocks of Matthew.

Second Sunday in Lent: John 4:54-42

This great story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman takes us immediately from the Matthean world into the richly symbolic world of John. On the whole, John has been read with more attention to its literary nuances than Matthew, most recently by Raymond Brown.

Here one cannot escape the images of water, of yet another man meeting yet another woman by a well, of the notion of the outcast (the Samaritan woman's five marriages could well represent the five nations who displaced the unfaithful people of Israel; 2 Kings 17:24).

The fact that this meeting should not be happening is something not to miss, but that discussion has taken place before and seems no longer surprising to our group. What did stir conversation was the idea that the talk at the well about God as spirit (which the woman knows) is now being focused in one whose spirit is truth. That truth will be known and made powerful once more as the Samaritans run to the well to hear for themselves what Jesus is saying and learn who he is. At the end of the story they believe because they themselves have heard, something that all evangelists must remember. Whatever tricks or wild enthusiasms are needed to get people to hear the good news, the point is to get them to hear it; the word which is truth itself will do the persuading. Luther knew that music was like the gospel in that it could change the human heart; still, we all know what it is like to get people to come and hear a musical performance of great artists who are unknown to the public. People rarely come on our testimony alone, and if they do, usually grudgingly. Even upon hearing what we are sure they will like, they have to decide for themselves what they will do. It is never certain how people are going to react to the hearing of the gospel—for the first or thousandth time—as the missionary stories (and this story where many, but not all, believe) show (cf. Acts 17).

Third Sunday in Lent: John 9:1-41

The third Sunday in Lent continues in the Johannine tradition with the text of the man who was born blind. The conversation with the community about why this man has been born blind is what caught the interest of our group of preachers.

All people's easy answers seem reasonable next to the strange and confounding answer of Jesus: that God's work might be revealed in him. As in many stories, everything is turned upside down here by the work of Christ. We have a man born blind who actually sees more than the religious authorities of his family and tribe. When he is made to see, he gets into even more trouble. The irony is strong. One of our number noted that we are so ginger about the healing texts that we tend not to address the issue of whether people actually need to be healed. Another told of being with a group asked to discuss these texts that became so worried about the issue of whether blindness is a "handicap" or simply another way to be gifted that they could produce almost no ideas. In an odd way, we have gotten so used to modern ways of seeing that we are blind again to the power of the text.

One suggested that this story is about the price we pay for coming to faith in Christ, which sets us apart from the old way of life and our former relationships. The former blind man was driven from the synagogue because his new sight caused him to question people in authority. When we "see" Jesus, we see everything around us in a new light, too, and the consequences of this can be astonishing. The disruptions of faith are complete. Another member of the group reminded us of those today who have been miraculously given sight for the first time. Because they did not learn to see at the proper age of brain development, they have not learned to see because their brain is simply not able to adapt to this new kind of information. It ignores the information that the eyes are giving it. This story of the healing of the blind man can show us

how—in so many ways—we have not been seeing; how, in fact, we have been blind to the ultimate realities being proclaimed Sunday after Sunday.

Fourth Sunday in Lent: Matthew 20:17-28

The story of the ambitious mother of the Zebedees also confounds us as it points to the cross, the ultimate “under the opposite sign” of the faith. Everything in the Gospels is connected to the cross, which is itself a reversal of self-fulfillment thinking. Christ gives his life as a ransom and loses it; he does not find “self-fulfillment.” This catches even the inner circle, as it catches us. It is only God who gives us freedom from our incessant need to find ourselves. Here Jesus teaches us that we get life from outside of ourselves. In Christ, we are no longer within ourselves.

Many people would like to get in on the ground floor of some new enterprise, so they can gain some power and influence in the world. But getting in on the ground floor of Jesus’ enterprise may have consequences in the opposite direction—a loss of power and influence, a bitter cup to drink before there can be joy in God’s kingdom. If we ask to be the church in these times, do we know what we are asking?

Fifth Sunday in Lent: John 11:1-53

Jesus’ final visit to Bethany to meet with his friends is also among the meatier texts of the Bible. Here we have Martha’s confession of the resurrection, her testimony that Jesus is the Messiah, and Jesus’ raising of Lazarus, from whom we

have no word at all. We find the typically Johannine various levels of meaning: Is Lazarus sleeping, is he ill, or is he dead? It is interesting to remember that Mary and Martha, Jesus’ disciples, and Jesus’ enemies, not to mention Jesus himself, all had something to gain if Lazarus stayed dead. Some preaching has even tried to get us to think how terrible Lazarus must have felt, having been raised into a life that was not perfect and from which he again must die. This misses a major point, but it does show us that people can fear resurrection even more than death; the change will be frightful to those who have been intent on being their own lord. Finality has a certain comfort; at least we know what to do. It is important in the text to notice how really dead Lazarus is, that he is so dead he stinks, as the irrepressible Martha blurts out. When Jesus raises the dead, his enemies decide to kill him rather than live with the uncertainty of such divine power.

Martha’s confession, which ranks with Peter’s, has been used to rehabilitate her by those miffed at her put-down by Jesus in Luke (Luke 10:41-42). It is not a bad move, though neither Martha nor Peter comprehend all the possibilities open to them and all of humanity when they make their confessions. Each one of the siblings in Bethany will have to learn this during the next few days, and they will. The personalities of all three, especially the women, are unique and show how the good news changes and gives life to each of us in peculiar ways. Because sermon preparation time involves more than just reading the text, pondering it, doing research and deep textual studies (it also involves reading around widely), the pastors urged me to conclude with this hymn text I wrote for John 11 two years ago. Each of the first three stanzas is from the point of view of one of the siblings, the last from all of us.

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BETHANY

Text: Gracia Grindal 1993

Tune: Carlton Young 1993



Lord, I be - lieve you are the Son of God
Lord, I be - lieve, now help my un - be - lief
Lord, I be - lieve you are my God and King.
Lord, we be - lieve that you will come a - gain



The one who was and is and yet to be,
When I am bro - ken - heart - ed and a - lone.
I'll serve you with the love I have to give.
And take us to the place you have pre - pared.



That you have come to save me from my sin,
Come to my grief and sor - row, raise me up,
Here, take my sin and blot it from the book,
We wait with joy and glad - ness that great day



That you have died, and rose to set me free!
Roll from my bur - ied heart its heav - y stone:
For you have giv en all that I might live:
When you will call us forth to meet you there.



You are the re sur - rec - tion and the life!

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