



Texts in Context

Preaching from the Fourth Gospel for Occasional Services

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THREE SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES CONFRONT THE HOMILIST ON THE OCCASION of a funeral, wedding, or other service related to the life cycle. First of all, what occurs is, at best, part of an “arbitrary set of rites that culture erects to mark [a]...social construct of life,...never entirely set free from its biological origins.”¹ Occasional services, tied as they are to biology, stand outside the church’s liturgical cycle (e.g., a wedding in Lent, a funeral in Holy Week). Occasional services are rarely timely! Secondly, such occasions are pre-eminently erected by culture not church. Cultural and familial expectations drive the event. “Dear Abby” and the family dog play significant roles.² “No rituals are more reflexive of and subject to cultural context than life-cycle rituals.”³ Thirdly, the church rites employed on such occasions “receive short shrift while churches give major attention, time, and support to the preparation of the weekly and daily services.”⁴ Antecedents for contemporary Lutheran rites of matrimony and burial of the dead were “hurried into the book without ref-

¹Lawrence A. Hoffman, “Life Cycle as Religious Metaphor,” in *Life Cycles in Jewish and Christian Worship*, ed. Paul F. Bradshaw and Lawrence A. Hoffman (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996) 3.

²*Forum Letter* 29/10 (October 2000) 1-3.

³Marjorie Procter-Smith, “Challenges to Christian Life-Cycle Ritual,” in *Life Cycles in Jewish and Christian Worship*, 256.

⁴Philip H. Pfatteicher, *Commentary on the Occasional Services* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 1.

Occasional services can sometimes occasion trite sermons. These may even be expected and desired. But, through creative use of John’s Gospel, the preacher can overcome cultural expectations and proclaim “life in his name” (John 20:31).

erence to the purely provisional character.”⁵ Liturgical resources are meager. The beleaguered homilist is assailed on all sides by time, culture, and rite.

Still, these occasional services give to the homilist the opportunity to offer theological and ritualized definitions of what life can be—in the words of the Johannine tradition, “life in his name” (John 20:31). Most clearly in the face of sickness and death Christianity has something to say, and the Fourth Gospel is of particular help, for its “signs” address both, culminating in the raising of Lazarus. Likewise, the homilist can turn to the gospel for insight into spiritual rebirth/baptism (John 3); the wedding at Cana is often recalled at marriages; and the promise of abundant life (John 10:10) legitimizes all of life as focus for theological reflection. Since culture proffers markers for the stages of biological life, the homilist has the opportunity to transform these “rites in search of theology”⁶ into markers on a spiritual journey to mature Christian faith. The Fourth Gospel can serve as a tool to redeem time, culture, and rite.

I. REDEEMING TIME

Recent scholarship has suggested that the Fourth Gospel, in addition to its narrative of the life of Jesus and the theological reflection on it, also “contains a down-to-earth reflection on people’s lives.”⁷ Since occasional services mark events in the life of the individual, the Fourth Gospel is a resource for the homilist to redeem the time(s).

Thomas L. Brodie proposes that “the essential design of the fourth gospel reflects the journey of a human life, particularly insofar as the journey involves diverse processes and stages of believing.”⁸ Brodie suggests that chapters 1-12 portray the journey of life and that chapters 13-21 unfold life’s central saving mystery. Using the three Passovers to mark stages, Brodie subdivides the journey: 1:1-2:22 reflect “the beginning of life, the youthful stage in which life seems positive, and believing is relatively easy”; 2:23-6:71 probe “the middle-aged stage in which awareness of sin and dividedness makes believing more difficult”; 7:1-12:50 ponder “a more advanced stage in which the shadow of death threatens to destroy both life and belief.”⁹

Typically the homilist turns to texts in the Fourth Gospel based on their content, choosing for example the wedding at Cana for a marriage or the story of Nicodemus for a baptism. If, however, the homilist were to employ Brodie’s hypothesis, the wedding of Cana might offer appropriate reflection for a young couple, but less so for a couple marrying in midlife, especially if that marriage is a second marriage

⁵Henry E. Jacobs, “The Making of the Church Book,” *Lutheran Church Review* 31 (1912) 618, quoted in Pfatteicher, 3.

⁶Bradshaw and Hoffmann, “Life Cycle as Theology,” in *Life Cycles in Jewish and Christian Worship*, 289.

⁷Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel according to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 31.

⁸*Ibid.*, 32.

⁹*Ibid.*, 33.

blending two families after a divorce. In the former case, to quote Brodie, “life seems positive.” In the latter case, “awareness of sin and dividedness makes believing [not to mention marriage] more difficult.” To redeem the time, the homilist will find advantage in choosing texts based on the Fourth Gospel’s designed reflection on the stages of life.

Assuming that the homilist uses rites similar to those in the *Occasional Services: A Companion to Lutheran Book of Worship* and is attentive to the stages of life, the homilist might consider the following texts for occasional services:

1. *For the youthful stage of life when believing is easy (John 1:1-2:22)*

At the *baptism of an infant*¹⁰ the homilist might turn to John 1:14-18, linking the new spiritual life of the child to the divine life that “became flesh and lived among us,” from whom “we all have received grace upon grace” and who has made the Father known. Not only is there a durative quality to God living among people, but “God is present in the human sphere” with an “enduring covenant of love.”¹¹ Likewise in John 1:29-34, the visionary identification of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and on whom the Spirit descends as the chosen Son of God anticipates later Pauline theology that associates freedom from sin and the granting of the Spirit with becoming children of God (Rom 7:14-8:15; 8:34; Eph 1:3-5). The one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit is also the paradigm of “the removal of sin and the granting of the Spirit [that] make a person into a chosen child of God.”¹²

For *first communion/confirmation*¹³ of youth the calling of the disciples (1:35-51) provides a resource for commentary in three scenes. The homilist might consider the same text on the occasion of the *organization of a congregation*.¹⁴ In the first scene (1:35-39), two anonymous disciples follow and stay with Jesus (cf. 15:5). In the second contrasting scene, a well-known disciple is brought to Jesus and named. In the third again contrasting scene, a named disciple is called, but this time there is significant resistance. The range of individuals and responses is not only characteristic of the Christian community, but also all within this diverse group share in common a promise full of possibilities: “You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man” (1:51).

The wedding at Cana (2:1-11) is an oft-chosen text for a *marriage*. It is the story of a festive occasion turned disastrous (the wine runs out), turned by Jesus

¹⁰While baptisms belong in the Sunday assembly, with the exception of those at the Vigil of Easter, they remain occasional and often elicit homiletical comment for which Johannine texts might be appropriate. The practice of private baptism, problematic as it may be liturgically and theologically, is an opportunity to proclaim the gospel even to the limited assembly.

¹¹Raymond Brown, *The Gospel according to John I-XII*, Anchor Bible 29 (New York: Doubleday, 1966) 35.

¹²Brodie, *John*, 157.

¹³Although often tied anachronistically to Pentecost or even Palm Sunday, the rite is included in this discussion because of its connection to the life cycle as a quasi-religious rite of passage.

¹⁴In parallel with the three stages of life proposed as a design for John 1-12, *Occasional Services* provides three rites marking stages in the life cycle of a congregation (250-259).

again to joy (an abundance of wine)—a fitting message about the reality and possibility of marital life appropriately addressed to younger couples caught up in the youthful excitement of marriage. For Rudolph Schnackenburg, “the believer experiences something of the divine being of Jesus...and also senses the brightness of the heavenly world” in this sign, but spiritually not bodily.¹⁵ Brodie reads the story as a movement from expectancy (“my hour has not yet come”; “do whatever he tells you”) to mystery (“the steward...did not know where it came from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew”) in which Jesus provides an extraordinary gift on the occasion of a wedding. But Brodie also cautions that marital life is not being portrayed as a “superficial joy ride” blessed by a generous Jesus.¹⁶ The wine is given “on the third day” in connection with Jesus’ “hour” and revealing his “glory.” In the context of the Fourth Gospel, such language links the wedding to the crucifixion and resurrection.

John 1:1-2:22 provides a number of texts appropriate to youthful stages of life when believing is easy, when responses come immediately or nearly so, when the new wine flows freely. The homilist redeems the time by connecting such occasions in the cycle of life to the generous promise and presence of Jesus.

2. For the middle stage of life when believing is more difficult (John 2:23-6:71)

As life progresses limitations are met, failures and losses occur, complexities abound, and believing becomes more difficult. Texts drawn from John 2:23-6:71 reflect such tensions. Beginning with the story of Nicodemus, Jesus goes about offering life as in the first section of the gospel. But the story block ends with the contrasting responses of Peter and Judas, of faith and betrayal (6:66-71). Life in the middle stage is no longer so simple.

Adults joining a congregation by *baptism* or *transfer from another congregation* have struggled with questions and faith, as did Nicodemus (3:1-16). The surrender and resignation of Peter’s confession juxtaposed to rejection by others (6:66-69) reflect the challenges of living by faith. Even Jesus’ generous promise of the bread of life, so that those who come will never be hungry and those who believe will never be thirsty (6:35-40), is given in the context of potential loss (6:39). The good news of eternal life (3:16; 6:54-56) is proffered through all these texts. But the internal conflict between flesh and spirit rages as well.

On the occasion of *marriage* in midlife, especially if the marriage is a second one, the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John 4 is suggestive.¹⁷ Not only is her convoluted marital status directly addressed (4:16-18), but so too is her social status as a shunned woman (coming to the well at noon by herself rather than in the morning with the other women). The messiness and sin of life are not ignored

¹⁵Rudolph Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to John*, vol. 1 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968) 335-337.

¹⁶Brodie, *John*, 172.

¹⁷The author of this paper would be pleased to hear from pastors who are bold enough to try this suggestion.

(or covered over with a white bridal gown). Instead, Jesus offers eternal life (4:14) and reveals himself as the coming one (4:26).

Just as in the middle stage of life signs of human frailty and weakness become more pronounced, it is in the second year of Jesus' ministry in the Fourth Gospel that Jesus heals the official's son (4:46-54) and the lame man (5:1-9). These texts are proper for a *service of healing* or the *laying on of hands and anointing of the sick*. The former text recalls the joy of the earlier sign at Cana, but now things are not so joyous and simple. A child is at the point of death; the crowd is rebuked for seeking signs and wonders; the official is desperate. In the latter text the man had been ill for thirty-eight years; he is without assistance; and the healing provokes controversy about the Sabbath law. Yet in the midst of it all comes a promise, "Your son will live" (4:50), and a command, "Stand up, take your mat and walk" (5:8). Believing is more difficult; but through believing there is "life in his name" (20:31).

Similarly, texts from the second year in the Fourth Gospel are suggestive for other occasions. John the Baptist's insistence that "he must increase," coming out of the tension of a discussion about purification (3:25-30), might be considered for the *rites pertaining to church offices and ordination*. For various *blessings and dedications*, the feeding of the five thousand (6:1-15) places side by side the doubts of Philip, the blessing of bread and fish by Jesus, and the wrongful intent of the crowd. For an occasion of *farewell and Godspeed*, the sea-walking (6:16-21) contrasts fright and an epiphany and culminates with the boat (early recognized as a symbol of the church) reaching the "land toward which they are going" (6:21). The "now" and "not yet" of eternal life (5:24-29) address the difficulty of believing when the homilist is called to *comfort the bereaved* at an untimely death.

The second year of the ministry of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel confronts the woundedness and handicaps of the middle stage of human life. Believing is more difficult. Some believe, some betray. But in Jesus "there is offered to all—if they will receive it—a gift of integrity, or wholeness,...of divine intimacy."¹⁸ The homilist redeems the time in the middle stage of life by announcing the offer.

3. For the advanced stage of life when death threatens both life and belief (John 7:1-12:50)

Between the second and third Passover in John's Gospel, Jesus is increasingly threatened by death and confronted by unbelief. Some seek to kill him (7:1); he speaks about "going away" (7:33; 8:21); opponents take up stones against him (10:31; 11:8); Lazarus dies (11:14); religious authorities plot his death (11:53); he knows his hour has come (12:23-26). "The entire section, in fact, is like a portrayal of human existence under the threat of death...reflect[ing] the third and final stage of life, that of advancing maturity and old age."¹⁹

Yet all is not darkness and despair. Living water, light, a good shepherd, and death-conquering resurrection point beyond temporal threats. Even the "entry

¹⁸Brodie, *John*, 291.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 297.

into the fateful Jerusalem has evocations of entering the Jerusalem of everlasting life.”²⁰ The words of Jesus at the end of chapter 12 are summary: “I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in darkness” (12:46). Occasions marking the third stage of life can be times that threaten both life and belief. The challenge to the homilist is to bring light that shines to eternal life (12:50).

In the third stage of life, a *service of healing*, the *laying on of hands and anointing of the sick*, and the *celebration of communion with those in special circumstances* have the purpose of sustaining faith and pointing to eternal life. Hope for full restoration of physical life has passed. On such occasions, Jesus’ invitation to the thirsty to come and drink from the living water (7:37-38)²¹ offers homiletical possibilities, for these words are set in the context of many threats, questions, and doubts. Likewise, Jesus’ sovereign announcement, “I am the light of the world; whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (8:12), is sharply contrasted with a range of questions and disbelief (8:13-30). But to those who have believed in him,²² Jesus promises truth and freedom (8:31-36). Most profound in this section of the gospel is the healing of the blind man (ch. 9). This darkness of his experience is from birth, but nonetheless Jesus asserts the opportunity for God’s works to be revealed in him (9:3). The blind man’s sight is restored, and, although threatened (9:24-34), in the end he comes to see in a new way (9:37), a seeing that believes (9:37-38; cf. 20:29). These three texts, with increasing intensity, shift the focus from that which threatens to a new light, a broader vision, a greater faith.

Inevitably in the third stage of life, death does draw near. The *commendation of the dying* and the *burial of the dead* mark the ending of the life cycle. Similarly, as one approaches the final Passover in the Fourth Gospel, several texts hold out hope to the dying and the bereaved.

In the tenth chapter of the gospel, the sheep are threatened with imminent death and destruction but are promised abundant life (10:10),²³ a promise reaffirmed in tripartite form: “I give them eternal life; and they will never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand” (10:28). “The teaching of this verse is not that believers will be saved from all earthly disaster, but that they will be saved, no matter what earthly disaster may befall.”²⁴

In the eleventh chapter, death strikes powerfully and personally (11:35). But even more powerful is Jesus’ sovereign assertion before this seventh sign: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,

²⁰Ibid., 298.

²¹For the christological interpretation adopted here in opposition to the reading of the NRSV, see Brown, *John*, 320.

²²The perfect tense of the Greek participle suggests a long-standing faith that still impacts the life of the believer.

²³Pertinent to the *closing of a congregation* might be the reference to “other sheep” and the “one flock, one shepherd” (10:16).

²⁴Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 521.

and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (11:25-26). Though it is already the fourth day, Lazarus comes forth to be unbound and set free—a sign both anticipated and surpassed on a third day by one who leaves the wrappings in the tomb (20:5-7).

In the twelfth chapter of the gospel, the hour has come for the Son of Man (12:23). Here the text offers a metaphorical reflection on death as the planting of a seed so that much fruit might be born. Into the mystery of death leading to life Jesus invites people to “Follow me” (12:26).

The third year of the ministry of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel confronts the increasing darkness and threat of death haunting the final stage of human life. As life fades, there is living water of eternal life, there is the light of life, and there is a seeing that believes. As death nears, the good shepherd leads to and through the shadow of death to fruitful and resurrected life. The homilist redeems the time in the third stage of life by sharing the mystery.

As the homilist redeems the time by so employing the above texts, the homilist must interpret each text in the context of the Fourth Gospel’s reflection on the stages of life. But the homilist must also take note of the soteriological context. The divine Jesus in John’s Gospel enters intimately into the human journey. He descends from where he was before (3:13; 6:33-58; 20:17). He becomes flesh; he provides bread; he weeps at the death of a friend. But, each stage of the journey also anticipates his personal entry into the ultimate human mystery and marker of the journey—death. For the stages are marked by the Passovers. In 2:19-22, during the cleansing at the first Passover, are the initial allusions to his death and resurrection. The events at the second Passover (6:4) culminate with the allusion to the betrayal (6:71). And the third Passover is the time of his glorification.

II. REDEEMING CULTURE AND RITE

The second challenge to the homilist at an occasional service pertains to familial and cultural expectations. Mere mention of weddings at a gathering of clergy elicits one horror story after another. The preferred hymn list for most funerals rarely transcends “In the Garden” and “How Great Thou Art.” The cultural context is often meager at best. Further, a third challenge derives from the church’s providing for such occasions what are at best second-class rites. One tool available for the clergy to redeem culture and rite is a homily drawn from the Gospel of John.

In discussing what C. H. Dodd called “the book of signs” (1:19-12:50), Raymond Brown notes how a “theme of replacement runs through Jesus’ actions and words,”²⁵ which bring some to believe and provoke others to hostility. The water of purification is replaced by an abundance of wine characteristic of the messianic days (Gen 49:10-11; Isa 25:6-10; Amos 9:13-15). The Jerusalem temple, turned into

²⁵Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997) 340.

a marketplace, is “replaced by the body of Jesus as the true holy place.”²⁶ The birth of flesh, including the presumed privilege of being a member of the chosen people, is replaced by the birth of the spirit in the Nicodemus story (3:6). The bridegroom replaces John (3:29-30). Living water takes the place of water from Jacob’s well (4:14). The fever leaves and life comes (4:52-53).

This theme of replacement suggests to the homilist a way of lifting the perspective of those occasionally gathered to greater life and faith. Specifically the homilist might take cultural trappings or familial expectations and redirect them to a greater vision of eternal life. Rather than fighting what often is a losing battle to preclude marginal actions or songs, the homily becomes an opportunity to replace them. As Jesus turned water into wine, so the homily becomes the opportunity to turn the unity candle at a marriage into an announcement of that “one flock and one shepherd” effected through the call of the good shepherd (10:16). As Jesus invited the shunned woman beyond the divisions of Jerusalem and Gerizim into a community constituted by spirit and truth (4:23-24), so the words spoken at a private baptism can be an invitation to a public profession in the assembly. As Jesus replaced fear of death with the promise, “Your son will live” (4:50), so the homily at the *burial of the dead* can move from the signs and trappings of grief (even the favorite song of the departed) and replace them with symbols of eternal life and resurrection (6:40). Even the blessing of a kitchen can be the opportunity to anticipate the paschal feast (6:51). In a sense the entire homiletical task is one of replacement, and in so doing the homilist can redeem cultural expressions.

Brown notes a second type of replacement in John 5-10. In a sequence of Jewish feasts—Sabbath, Passover, Booths, and Dedication—“something Jesus does or says plays on and to some extent replaces a significant aspect of the feast.”²⁷ On the Sabbath, God continues to work through Jesus to heal and give life. At Passover Jesus provides food miraculously to about five thousand, as much as they wanted (in parallel to the leisure and luxury of the Passover meal). But after so doing, Jesus speaks of himself as the bread of life whose flesh and blood nourishes for eternal life. At Booths, the water rituals are supplanted by the announcement that from within Jesus shall flow rivers of living water (7:38). Finally at the festival recalling the rededication of the temple, its consecration is replaced by Jesus’ claim to be the one consecrated and sent into the world (10:36), a claim confirmed in the raising of Lazarus (11:42-43).

Might not some replacement be in order for aspects of the undeveloped occasional services following the cues of the Fourth Gospel, if the rite is redeemed to affirm that vision of abundant life and depth of faith incarnate and made manifest in Jesus? The liturgy can preach and teach as powerfully as any homily. To redeem the rites thoughtfully in view of the themes of the Fourth Gospel is a worthy anticipa-

²⁶Ibid., 341.

²⁷Ibid., 344.

tion of the time “when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth” (4:23).

Time, culture, and rite are ripe for redemption into words and signs that deepen faith and proclaim abundant life. A homilist attuned to the structure and themes of the Fourth Gospel might on occasion foster such a transformation. ⊕

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