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Joy Comes with the Morning

In the recurring debate about whether every Christian sermon on the Old Testament must say the name Jesus and directly pronounce the forgiveness of sins, I have defended the negative—not for any deliberate downplaying of Jesus but because I think that first and foremost the preacher is called to preach the biblical texts. To be sure, those of us who are Gentile Christians read the Old Testament as Scripture only because of Christ; thus we will always read the Old Testament in light of Christ, and our sermons will show that. The God we proclaim is always the Father of Jesus Christ, and most often we will say that naturally and directly. Still, all sermons, like all biblical texts, won't say the same thing. Faithfully to preach the texts as they stand will enrich our understanding of what God is up to in Jesus. Just as the Old Testament texts once pointed to Jesus, they will continue to do so, whether or not a particular sermon says this explicitly.

One of the arguments for why the sermon need not itself always pronounce the forgiveness of sins, if that is not the message of a particular text, is that the liturgy does this—often repeatedly—precisely because in Lutheran understanding this is the heart of the gospel. Forgiveness is the transformation of everything, the gift of liberation from all that stands between us and the kingdom of God. That is why Jesus offered both healing and forgiveness to the paralytic (Mark 2:1–12) and why Luther could say that forgiveness *is* the gospel—a sweeping gospel by which God "pledges and obligates himself to grant peace and help in order to deliver us from misery, not only to pardon all our sins, but even to blot them out, and in addition to this to create in us love and delight in keeping his law."[1] Preach nothing else, said Luther—that is, preach no other gospel, nothing else as gospel. Luther, too, could preach without naming Jesus, as he did, for example, in his sermons on the Ten Commandments,[2] but he rightly taught us, with Paul, that all God's promises have their Yes in Christ (2 Cor 1:20).

My argument has a problem, of course, when the liturgy fails to do its job. If the liturgy serves merely as warm-up for the sermon, then the sermon will have to "do" the gospel all by itself, and will rarely have time to open to people the full

[1]Martin Luther, "Sermon for the Third Sunday in Advent" (Matt 11:2–10), in *Sermons of Martin Luther: The Church Postils*, ed. John N. Lenker, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995); WA 10/1[2]: 158.

[2]Martin Luther, "Ten Sermons on the Catechism" (Nov 30–Dec 18, 1528), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 51, ed. John W. Doberstein (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959) 137–161.

wonders of God's work in the biblical witness. We need the liturgy to proclaim the gospel, in confession and forgiveness, in lessons and sacraments, so the sermon can, if necessary, preach the law—or proclaim the Creator or explore the work of God in lesser-known parts of the Bible that might produce their own kind of "Aha" experience in the hearer. The preacher needs a robust liturgy in order to set the sermon free to preach the text in all its fulness and particularity.

With this understanding, the practice of confession and forgiveness is not at all something dark and depressing; it is life and freedom, transformation and renewal, release and joy—which liturgy and preaching, catechesis and pastoral care should regularly make clear. Paul Ricoeur's observation is striking:

> [T]he Christian does not say: I believe in sin, but: I believe in the remission of sins; sin gets its full meaning only retrospectively, from the present instant of 'justification,' in the language of St. Paul....It follows that the description of sin...belong[s] to the faith only secondarily and derivatively, as the best counterpart of a gospel of deliverance and hope.[3]

Ricoeur is right, of course. The Creed never says, "I believe in sin"; it says, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins"—and there is a world of difference. We don't have to "believe" in sin; it is simply an observable fact. Indeed, as Fred Niedner says in his article in this issue, every human story, whether biography or fiction, is about sin—no brokenness, no plot. I don't have to "believe" in death. It's out there, waiting to grab me, whether I believe in it or not. What I *believe* in is resurrection, that is, forgiveness—the striking assertion that the observable realities of human frailty are not all there is.

We do not repent—confess our sins—in order to wallow in a slough of despond, but to leap, as from a springboard, into life itself. Confession is only penultimately about sin. Ultimately, it is about forgiveness. To be sure, facing the truth about myself, my neighbor, and the world is a painful moment. But only a moment: "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning" (Ps 30:5).

This is the gospel that good liturgy and good preaching will announce—always, no matter the grammar and rhetoric of a particular sermon, proclaiming a God of liberation whose heart is most fully revealed in Jesus Christ, child of Mary and Son of God.

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[3]Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Paperback, 1969) 307.