LECTIONARY HOMILETICS

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INSTRUCTIONS: PREACHING THE LESSON

CONTENT

1) You have been invited to participate because of your special background in homiletics. Basically, you are to write on various ways in which the lesson might be preached today. This is not to be a sample sermon. You might want to indicate how you would develop a sermon from the lesson or how you have in the past. You might want to write on how the themes of the lesson intersect with what is going on in the world today and how a sermon might be developed from this. You might want to suggest homiletical movements, structure or how the homiletical flow might begin. You will need to suggest ways to move from the "text to sermon" and provide, perhaps, homiletical strategies. It might help to ask "What does this text want to have happen in the life of the hearers? What is it asking people to think, feel, will, do? Where does it connect with people's lives today? How can the message be made concrete and memorable?"
2) This particular essay will follow other essays on exegesis, doctrinal theology, pastoral theology, theology-and-culture, and reviews of other sermons. We ask that the writers of those essays send a copy of their finished work to you, so that you may draw upon their insights in order to bring it all to a close for the reader. You are not bound to work from their insights, but rather you are free to do so. In addition, because all the essays have the same due date, you are allowed 2-3 weeks extra time beyond the given due date.
3) You are asked to concentrate on one of the four lessons. It may be helpful to draw connections and parallels (if possible) between the gospel lesson(s) and the non-gospel lessons.
4) Exegetical material on the lesson will addressed by another writer, so please do not include this in your material.
5) Remember that you are writing to an **ecumenical** audience. You may certainly reference movements within particular traditions, but be aware that your readership is broad-ranging.
6) Please use your unique background; however, avoid professional jargon. Draw on your knowledge of recent trends in scholarship, but make it accessible to the pastor in the pulpit.
7) Keep in mind the **liturgical season**.
8) Provide **proper documentation** for your sources (author, publisher, year, etc.). Do not submit copyrighted material; when quoting another source, be careful not to quote more than fifty words from any particular source. However, this "fifty-word rule" does not apply to smaller works (such as poems). In that case, only quote a *relatively small portion.* Also remember that *hymns are copyrighted;* quoting verses of hymns requires us to pay the copyright holder (which we are willing to do if a really good point is being made). Be *particularly careful* to provide full URLs (website addresses) when referring to online material.
9) Be parsimonious in your use of footnotes and quotations. Readers are interested in your thoughts and analysis.
10) Try to use language that reflects the value of all persons. Avoid the awkward constructions him/her, he/she, etc. Instead, consider using single gender examples or illustrations from real life, which include a multi-gendered presentation. If you are using a "clinical example," please use a fictitious name.
11) Use active verbs whenever you can. Active verbs energize the reader and the listener.
12) Do not begin sentences with "And" and rarely begin a sentence with "But."
13) Use complete sentences (subject + verb).
14) Essay length: 800 to 1000 words.

FORMAT

1) Please send your essays on diskette along with a hard copy, or send as an e-mail attachment. If you cannot send an electronic version, your essays will be scanned which requires a **quality, double-spaced** hard (paper) copy.
2) The preferred word processing program is *MSWord* although *WordPerfect* is acceptable.
3) Page numbering can be used but do not use headers or footers.
4) Use an em-dash — not double hyphens — for emphasis. No space between words and—dash (In *Word* the em-dash is Ctrl [key] + Alt [key] + - [minus sign on numeric keypad]).
5) Italicize the titles of books, plays, magazines, etc. Do not underline. Songs, poems, and articles take quotation marks.
6) Use **one** space after a period, question mark, and colon.
7) Quotation marks go **after** punctuation at the end of a sentence, but inverted commas (single quotation marks) go **before** punctuation. "For instance, when 'quoting within a quote'**.**" In notes and between parentheses, use brief abbreviations for books of the Bible with no periods. Example: Mk 2:1-17. In the text of your essay, spell out books of the Bible.
8) Use the following format for citing verses within parentheses. For a single verse: v. 18. For multiple verses: vv. 5-11.
9) Place all notes at end of each essay and *not* at the bottom of each page. Follow the basic format of these examples for books, plays, and magazines. Note p. for one page and pp. for multiple pages.

NOTES
1. Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 45.
2. Thomas War, "Openness to All," *Weavings*, Vol. XI, No. 4, pp. 21-25.

Please contact the office if you have any further questions.

SAMPLE ESSAY #1

This piece originally appeared in the April-May 2003 issue of *Lectionary Homiletics* (April 6, 2003: Fifth Sunday in Lent, pp. 5-6).

Preaching the Lesson

John 12:20-33

Threat hangs in the air as the scenes of John 12:20-33 unfold. The preacher can help the congregation hear all that is at stake here by making reference to immediately preceding events, making palpable the tension that surrounds the arrival of the Greeks, the interchange with Philip and Andrew, and the ensuing dialogue with the crowd. Otherwise, the arrival of the Greeks can seem to come out of nowhere, and Jesus' response to it seems odd indeed.

Although many fine sermons have been launched from the request of the Greeks, "Sir, we would see Jesus," the fact is that this is not the center of gravity in the text. Mystifyingly, the evangelist shows little interest in either the seekers or their question and veers off instead to focus on the decisiveness of this "hour" for Jesus (vv. 23, 27). How can the preacher follow this lead in the text? A challenging, but important, sermon arises from tracing the two interrelated themes of Jesus' "hour" and the "gathering of the world" to Jesus (represented by the arrival of the Greeks). These themes can be traced inductively through the gospel to their convergence here.

We have been on notice that a decisive "hour" is coming since chapter 2 of the gospel; we have been waiting for this, scanning the horizon and holding our breath. References to Jesus' coming "hour" can be found in John's gospel at 2:4, 7:6, 8, and 30, and 8:20. Hearers will need to be reminded of this to appreciate what is unfolding in John 12. All of the previous references to Jesus' hour have pointed toward the future. In each case, it was said that Jesus' hour "has not/had not yet come." But suddenly, with the arrival of the Greeks, the critical hour *has* come!

The surprise of the text—the piece that doesn't seem to fit—is that the decisive hour seems to be precipitated not so much by gathering forces of opposition as by the gathering of hopeful seekers. Jesus, as if reading some secret code, discerns in this the decisive turning point of his ministry.

By searching the gospel, we learn that Jesus has announced that he has "other sheep who are not of this fold" whom he "must bring also" (10:16). Next, after the raising of Lazarus, the evangelist finds in the words of Caiphas the high priest (11:51-2) a prophecy that Jesus will die "not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God." A throng greets Jesus' entry to the city of Jerusalem, and the Pharisees declare to one another that "the world has gone after him!" (12:19). The "world" is converging toward Jesus; why does this convergence signal Jesus' hour? Because, paradoxically, in order to be given to the whole world that seeks him, Jesus must give himself over to death. "If I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you," says Jesus, "but if I go, I will send him to you" (16:7). Jesus embraces the hour of crisis and death for the sake of a more universal community in the Spirit. The hour of the Son heralds the age of the Spirit. Jesus recognizes that the only way the Spirit can become present to all is for him to relinquish his life, opening the way to a more universal community than either Jewish or Greek seekers have envisioned. The grain that dies bears much fruit (12:24); and were he to love his own life he would only lose it. Jesus, releasing his life, multiplies life to all.

Another approach to preaching this text would be to focus on the sayings in verses 24-26. The inclusive love of God and trust in that love are keys to understanding these sayings. It is crucial that these sayings be preached with due attention to their context, held within the framework of *Jesus*' self-giving, lest they function to celebrate self-abnegation for its own sake. As with Jesus' own self-relinquishing, it is for the sake of God's love for the *world* that Christians lay down everything, including life itself.

Verse 25 is particularly tricky for preachers. Here the hyperbolic language of "hating" life and the apparent denigration of "this world" occur together. Crucial to interpreting this verse is helping listeners remember what "world" signifies for John. It is symbolic language for the world-system that secures its future apart from God. Those who "hate" their lives in this world system give up their stake in it, demonstrating their faith that God secures our lives, and God is trustworthy. Jesus' freedom and joy in releasing his life is the freedom and joy of trust.

Still another sermon on this text might focus on the soliloquy and dialogue of verses 27-33. It is important not to conflate this scene in John with the Synoptics' Gethsemane. The entire "trouble" of Jesus' soul is presented in a single phrase, and Jesus quickly moves to embrace his "hour." John's Jesus knows neither anguished prayers nor bloody sweat. When the voice of assurance comes, it is for the sake of the crowd, not for Jesus (v. 30). From this point on, Jesus is portrayed as calmly in charge of his own trial and death, drawing all people to himself (v. 32). Jesus moves ahead perfectly at peace in the hands of the trustworthy Father by whose power his death will be, at one and the same time, his glorification. This is hard stuff for contemporary hearers, who need the permission for struggle with fear and doubt in the face of death and loss that the Synoptic writers seem to give. A sermon can acknowledge this, and yet proclaim the profound trustworthiness of God that John underscores so insistently.

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SAMPLE ESSAY #2

This piece originally appeared in the February-March 2004 issue of *Lectionary Homiletics* (March 21, 2004: Fourth Sunday in Lent, pp. 57-8).

Preaching the Lesson

Joshua 5:9-12

These few verses give the preacher many things to consider and several approaches. Given rich descriptions already offered of exegetical, theological, pastoral and other aspects, you may first want to determine your own position on historical-critical questions. Will you take the literary continuity between what comes before and after as essential to the status of verses 9-12 as scripture? Or will you follow a stream of redaction criticism that views these as a later insertion into the text and so historically independent of the scene before or after? You may separate the text on simple liturgical grounds, noting that it is only those three verses that will be read in worship and so are freed from their context when heard. Such separation will allow a topical focus on shame in general and the role of divine declaration and liturgical expression in freeing hearers from the hidden or public shames they may carry into worship. It will also warrant a rather free-standing exploration of God's provision and our responsibility. This will come by reflecting on Israel's forty years of divine welfare (their manna in the wilderness) in comparison to their new opportunity to feast from land they can also now work. The text invites an allegorization to the spiritual and emotional development of your hearers.

You may also want to consider the marked contrast between Joshua's vision of Israel taking the land and that in Judges. One is easy and nearly instant. The other is labored and long (see "Exegesis" for this week). Can both be true, in their way, as we consider God's work in history? Here is a sermon about time, providence, and perspective.

However, accepting the literary context as the canonical form that makes these verses scripture may shape preaching in different ways—closing some possibilities and presenting others. It may yet allow the kinds of allegorization suggested above but with different nuances. Further possibilities presented here presume this canonical context.

If the poignancy of verse 9 takes your attention, consider how verses 1-8 might shape preaching. We're told that all the kings of the land the Israelites were about to conquer lost their nerve to fight when hearing of YHWH drying the Jordan for the Israelites to cross. This repetition of the Reed Sea crossing out of Egypt links the experience of Joshua's people with the earlier generation's exodus. This is made more explicit in the following verses as YHWH is said to order Joshua to perform a communal circumcision ceremony on the generation of men left uncircumcized during their forty-year sojourn. The earlier generation is gone and the new generation doesn't know the earlier devotion even as they still suffer from earlier sins. The new ritual marks these young men as they prepare for battle, and so makes intermingling with the Amorites and Canaanites less likely. It also reminds them of the pain of identity. It is while they are resting to heal their wounds that God tells Joshua that the "shame of Egypt" is rolled away—like the rolling of the stone before the Christ's tomb, the people rising shameless. Making their Passover meal ties the release of their shame to the long story and liturgical memory of their people. This link allows one to see the shame in terms perhaps broader than only the memory of slavery—as shameful as that memory may be, given that even today the trauma of oppression sometimes produces an undefined shame in ones own victimage. This link sees the shame as extending into the sojourn itself, "Egypt" representing the whole story of the people as the earlier generation walked off its own disobedience in the wilderness with no clear end in sight and a new generation was left rather without purpose at all. The intergenerational struggle for continuity and inheritance is part of the shame that is mediated by the movement among the second circumcision, repetition of the Passover, and divine declaration.

New realities must be acknowledged alongside enacted continuities, however. The transition from manna to produce marks this. For "on that very day," the intergenerational continuity shifts from a material continuity of sojourn and miraculous provision to a continuity of identity and liturgy within a new material reality. This shift may be worth considering.

YHWH seems at first to withdraw before the people's new responsibility to produce their goods from the land. On the edge of the land of promise, it is as if the people are expelled from their odd Eden of provision and required again to survive from the sweat of their brow. So is the mixed blessing of Canaan, a land flowing with fertile areas from which sweetness like honey or jams come and areas of barrenness on which milk-producing goats and sheep graze. The promise may be of both prosperity and struggle.

Now comes an implication of the passage immediately following this lesson. Joshua meets an armed stranger and challenges his loyalty. This stranger reminds Joshua that there are more than two sides to the struggle of history, for he is on neither Joshua's side nor the enemy's. He is a messenger from God, and Joshua makes an appropriate act of contrition. The land his people are called to work, in a way signifying their independence from God's sustaining intervention, is nevertheless holy. Like the act of removal in circumcision that marks the identity of the nation, so Joshua marks the holiness of the land—even as it is tilled for human purpose—by removing his shoes. Here is another act of continuity with Moses and the generation YHWH first called out.

How are we to negotiate continuities and discontinuities of history in the work and liturgies of God's people? How are we to retrieve both the freedom God gives and a sense of holiness and responsibility in what we do with that freedom? How is our shame—as individuals and as a community of faith—lifted by the gracious act of divine Spirit when we find that life-giving integration of continuity and discovery, freedom and responsibility?

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