

Lenten Preaching: An Open Letter to the Clergy of the WELS

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It is often with a start that the parish pastor, still trying to get his breath after the busy holiday season and still engrossed with the compiling of statistics for the annual congregational meeting or in response to the gentle prodding of the synodical statistician, realizes that Lent is just around the corner. His flesh may groan at the prospect of added sermons and services. But his new man rejoices over the privilege of going with his people to the Holy of Holies of our Christian faith as he leads them step by step closer to the solemnities of Good Friday to behold Him made sin for us who knew no sin that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.

He may have given the matter some passing thought before, but now he must settle down in earnest to decide upon a series of Lenten sermons. For young pastors this should present no difficult problem. It has become traditional with us to advise a beginning pastor to follow the old church pericopes in the first years of his ministry, both to give evidence of his desire to be conservative and because his people will appreciate having those Scripture portions which are read in the service year after year explained and applied. By the same token, since it is also traditional among us to read the passion history in successive portions during the Lenten season, the first series of Lenten sermons would best be sermons which treat portions of the passion history. In it there is material enough for at least five years of Lenten sermons.

The pastor who has a number of years of preaching Lenten sermons behind him, however, will be concerned about finding a series which offers a variety from those which he has preached in previous years. This striving for variety can be overdone. There is always danger that a pastor will feel frustrated if he cannot come up with something novel, or that in his grim determination to be different in this year's Lenten series he will resort to a series which is shallow or far-fetched. The words of Philippians 3:1 could be applied in this connection also: "To write the same things to you, to me indeed is not grievous, but for you it is safe." Is it really awful to use again a series which was used, let's say, ten years ago? By that we do not mean merely to dust off ten-year-old sermons and repeat them. A conscientious pastor will hardly do that. The Lord told Timothy through St. Paul: "Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; that thy profiting may appear to all" (I Tim. 4:15). This "profiting" means progress, growth. There is the continuing process of maturing and growing in experience. And there is growth which is cultivated by a faithful, devotional use of the Word. The very fact that a man has grown in ten years will make him want to do fresh work even though he uses the same series which he used a number of years ago. Only after he has pinned down the thoughts which have come to him as a result of his fresh work will he want to read an old sermon to see whether he saw something in his text last time which he missed this time. If so, he will add it to that which he has already found. I call this standing upon one's own shoulders in order to be taller.

But back to the use of a series which was used ten years ago. No doubt there will be those in the congregation who heard it then. Don't credit all of them with remembering it. As for those who do, we learn by review: *repetitio est mater studiorum*. And don't forget, there will be children in the congregation who were not even born when the series was last used. And in most cases there will also be new faces among the adults.

There are many possibilities for sober, pertinent Lenten series beside those which follow the chronological order of the passion history. At least two series are possible on some of the main characters in the passion history. I have found that there is a good balance between good examples and bad. The places of the passion provide ample material for a series. Then there are the Old Testament prophecies of the passion and Old Testament types of the passion.

A word of caution is in place concerning the treatment of series like these. One might present some interesting character sketches or vivid descriptions of places and still fail miserably in living up to the high purpose of all preaching and especially of Lenten preaching. Christ must always be in the foreground. Paul's motto must be the motto of the Lenten preacher: "I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (I Cor. 2:2). This is where the homiletician's skill will be put to the test. It may not be as necessary to strive to apply all of the principles of sound homiletics in a Lenten sermon. We allow for a

greater degree of freedom and flexibility in evening and occasional sermons. But we are not ambassadors for Christ unless we preach Christ.

We shall append a number of series in order to be concrete without in any way implying that we have exhausted the possibilities. At the same time we are going to make a request of our readers. We have indicated that Scriptures offer material for a wide variety of sober and pertinent Lenten series. No doubt there are some of you who have done original work in searching out such a series. Bearing in mind the principle: “The manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal” (I Cor. 12:7), we are asking you to share with your brethren what the Lord has permitted you to find. A year from now we should like to print an anthology of original Lenten series as submitted by our readers. May we count upon your cooperation? If you have used an original series which you found to be edifying, please send it to the managing editor. We can’t offer any prizes, but if you can be used to help a brother, the satisfaction of having done so will be reward enough.

Historical Series

Note: For the chronological sequence I have by and large followed A. Nebe *Die Leidensgeschichte unsers Herrn Jesu Christi nach den vier Evangelien ausgelegt*. He begins, as the suggested series does, with Matthew 26:1–5, and includes, as do the evangelists, both the anointing at Bethany and Judas’ bargain. Those who prefer to begin with the account of Maundy Thursday will find material to fill the gaps left by the omission of the earlier events in either the omitted portions, which we are about to mention, or by dividing the longer texts. Luke 22:24–38 and John 13:31–35 have been omitted, as have the farewell discourses and the sacerdotal prayer of John 14 to 17. Details in the chronological sequence which are not included by the evangelist from whose account the respective texts have been taken may easily be inserted from the parallel accounts.

Series I

1. Matthew 26:1–5: Jesus Predicts His Passion
2. Mark 14:3–9: Mary Anoints Jesus
3. Matthew 26:14–16: Judas’ Bloody Bargain
4. Luke 22:7–18: A Glimpse of Glory before the Passion
5. John 13:1–17: Jesus Washes His Disciples’ Feet
6. John 13:18–30: Jesus Reveals the Betrayer
7. Matthew 26:26–28 may be used on either Maundy Thursday or Good Friday

Series II

1. Matthew 26:30–35: On the Way to Gethsemane
2. Matthew 26:36–46: The Agony of Prayer
3. John 18:3–12: Christ Captured
4. John 18:13,14,19–24: Jesus before Annas
5. Matthew 26:57–68: Christ before Caiaphas
6. Luke 22:54–62: Peter’s Denial

Series III—From Gabbatha to Golgatha

1. Matthew 27:1–10: The Death of Judas
2. John 18:28–38: Christ’s Good Confession before Pilate
3. Luke 23:5–12: Christ before Herod
4. Matthew 27:15–26: Jesus or Barabbas
5. John 19:1–16a: Jesus Scourged, Mocked, and Sentenced
6. Luke 23:26–32: The Way of Sorrows

Series IV—Sidelights of the Crucifixion, or “Crucified, Dead, and Buried”

1. John 19:19–22: The Superscription on the Cross
2. Matthew 27:35,36,38–44: Christ Crucified Mocked
3. Matthew 27:45,51–56: Signs Seen at the Crucifixion
4. John 19:31–37: The Pierced Side
5. John 19:38–42: The Burial of Jesus
6. Matthew 27:62–66: The Sealing of the Tomb

Series V—“Our Blessed Savior Seven Times Spoke”

1. Luke 23:34: The Forgiving Savior
2. John 19:26,27: The Considerate Savior
3. Luke 23:43: The Saving Savior
4. Matthew 27:46: The Forsaken Savior
5. John 19:28: The Thirsting Savior
6. Luke 23:46: The Dying Savior
7. (Good Friday) John 19:30: The Triumphant Savior

Characters

Series I

1. Matthew 26:14–16: Judas, the Fallen Disciple
2. John 19:26,27: John, the Faithful Disciple
3. Mark 15:10: The Chief Priests, Worst Element of the Nation
4. Luke 23:27–31: The Weeping Women, a Better Element of the Nation
5. Luke 22:54–62: Simon Peter, the Cross-Shirker
6. Mark 15:21: Simon, the Cross-Bearer
7. Mark 15:6–15 (Good Friday): Barabbas, Type of Sinners

Series II

1. John 12:1–8: Mary of Bethany—Model of Faith
2. Luke 23:5–12: Herod the King—Prey of Unbelief
3. Mark 15:42–46: Joseph of Arimathea—a Weak Man Become Strong
4. Matthew 27:24: Pontius Pilate—a Strong Man Become Weak
5. Mark 15:39: The Centurion—a Stranger Won
6. Matthew 26:57–68: Caiaphas—a Son Cast Out
7. Luke 23:39–43 (Good Friday): The Penitent Malefactor—Firstfruits of the Cross

Old Testament Types

1. Genesis 22:1–18: Isaac—a Type of Christ
2. Genesis 50:20: Joseph—a Type of the Suffering Savior
3. Exodus 12:3–13: The Passover—a Type of Christ
4. Leviticus 16:15–17: The Highpriest—a Type of Christ
5. Leviticus 1:1–9: The Burnt Offering—a Type of Christ
6. Psalm 41:9: David’s Betrayal—a Type of Christ’s
7. Numbers 21:4–9 (Good Friday): The Brazen Serpent—a Type of Christ

Places of the Passion

1. Matthew 26:17–29: The Upper Room
2. Matthew 26:36a: Gethsemane

3. Matthew 26:57–68: The Highpriest’s Palace
4. Matthew 27:1: Pilate’s Palace
5. Luke 23:26–31: The Way of Sorrows
6. John 19:41,42: Joseph’s Garden
7. John 19:17 (Good Friday): Golgotha

Lenten Questions

1. Matthew 26:40: Could Ye Not Watch with Me One Hour?
2. Matthew 26:50: Wherefor Art Thou Come?
3. Matthew 26:54: How then Shall the Scripture Be Fulfilled?
4. Luke 22:70: Art Thou the Son of God?
5. John 18:37: Art Thou a King?
6. Matthew 27:22: What Shall I Do with Jesus?
7. Matthew 27:46 (Good Friday): Why Hast Thou Forsaken Me?

I have used a series on Lenten hymns but found it hard to sustain a high level of interest for six sermons. After all, the Spirit does not breathe in hymns as directly and powerfully as He does in His living Word. I believe that an analysis of hymns fits better for more informal presentation in the devotional portion of meetings or organizations. I was not too happy with a series in which I sought to present the Passion in Scripture, using as the six divisions Moses, the Prophets, the Psalms (Ketubim), the Gospels, the Epistles, and Revelation. So it is on the basis of experience that I came to express the view in the foregoing that it is better to rotate tested and meaty series than to feel obligated to come up with a new series every year and run the risk of ending up with some that are shallow, far-fetched, or more or less unsatisfactory for some other reason. That does not mean that we may not try for an original series in which we endeavor to avoid the pitfalls into which some have fallen because they tried when they were not really ready. We are sure that there are some among our readers who have been blessed with the joy of finding an original series which brought them pleasure and their people edification. It is for that reason that we ask them to let us use these pages a year from now to share such series with their brethren.

May the Lord grant you and your people an edifying Lenten season.