

Preaching on the First or Second Reading with the Day's Gospel in Mind *3 – Preparing the Sermon*

By James Tiefel

When my dad died in 2008, I decided to contact the four congregations he had served during his ministry. I asked the local pastors if they might announce his passing in case someone remembered. At least one did. A member in her 90s walked out of church and told her pastor, "I remember Pastor Tiefel's first sermon." The young pastor was eager to know what she remembered. "I don't remember much of anything," she said, "except the text. He preached on the draught of fishes." I've retold that story many times over the years and invariably end the same way: That's the highest compliment a pastor can receive.

"Preach the text" is the imperative the homiletics professor lays before student preachers—and then obligates them to do it in class sermons. The sermon, as we learned it and as we teach it, exposit a text, it explains and applies a passage of Scripture. On the basis of that exposition, the sermon proposes a truth. The sermon can take on a variety of forms—didactic, inductive, homily, narrative, or expositional¹—but the best Lutheran preaching in all cases exposit a text and proposes a truth as it proclaims law and gospel.

Is the writer backing away from this "preach the text" allegiance?

Those who have read the first two articles in this series may have wondered if the writer is backing away from this "preach the text" allegiance. If the preacher preaches on the First or Second Reading with the day's Gospel in mind, does the new imperative actually become "preach the texts"? Does the preacher end up preaching on two texts instead of one? Does such a sermon compromise the unique setting and message of the alternate reading?

Those are legitimate questions, especially when asked by men with our homiletical training and exegetical sensitivities. Rest easy. The preacher who takes on this idea must still preach the text. He lets the text say what the Spirit wants it to say and does not manipulate the Spirit's intention. He preaches the text in its historical context and allows the text's proposal to guide the sermon. *The goal of this kind of preaching is to maintain textual independence even as we understand the preeminence of the day's Gospel and the inter-dependency of the Sunday Proper.*

At the same time we realize that preaching styles are not static. We preach the same truths (often based on the same texts) our grandfathers preached, but we preach them in different ways. Sermons today are less oratorical and more conversational. They often contain inductive approaches even if they announce a theme and several parts. Our fathers would not have dreamed of leaving the pulpit to preach (nor would some of their sons), but this is common in our circles. As someone who has observed the evolution of the lectionary and its propers over the span of almost 50 years, I sense the *Christian Worship* resources provide an excellent opportunity to place both the chosen text and the day's Gospel in clear view in the sermon.

The preacher can expect that this approach takes a little additional work and time. Following are some steps which can make the effort manageable and rewarding. Illustrations are based on the Proper for Advent 4C scheduled for December 19, 2021.

Choose the Text

Preachers select their sermon text in a variety of ways. Some follow a specific pattern; some simply choose the text they want to preach on. I belong to the latter group, but there is a reason

for my choice. During this past Advent season I had preached on three Luke texts in a row; it seemed time for a prophetic or epistle text on Advent 4. I copied the Prayer of the Day and the three readings and spent some time reading and thinking about them: Micah 5:2-5a, Hebrews 10:5-10, and Luke 1:39-55. A phrase in the Prayer of the Day caught my eye: "Take away the burden of our sins" and that phrase made me look more carefully at the Hebrews reading. I had never preached on that text before and preaching on Hebrews on Advent 4 seemed intriguing.

Veteran preachers who have preached through the ILCW/CW lectionary will notice many new texts in the new lectionary especially during the Epiphany and Pentecost seasons. While the Gospel selections remain very much the same, the First and Second Readings are often new.

Begin with the Gospel

I begin with a study of the day's Gospel, obviously if that's my chosen text but also if I've decided to preach on one of the other readings. I know these Gospels pretty well, but a new look is important. In our new resources the Gospel invariably guides the theme or focus for the day and sets the course for the rest of the Proper.

The Gospel for Advent 4 in Year C is Luke 1:39-55 and relates two themes: Elizabeth's reaction to Mary's pregnancy (the Visitation) and Mary's *Magnificat*. Neither Luke 1:39-45 nor Luke 1:46-55 appeared in the historic series nor in CW's One Year Series. The Roman Lectionary selected the Visitation but not the *Magnificat* for Advent 4. The ILCW lectionary selected both accounts for the Gospel reading on Advent 4C but placed 46-55 in parentheses suggesting it to be optional. All the other Lutheran lectionaries since then follow that pattern. Only the *Christian Worship* resources, past and present, select the entire pericope for Advent 4. I'm glad both sections are there.



*It all happened, not just with a baby's cry in a manger but with the Savior's cry from the cross: **It is finished.***

The Song of Mary can't be ignored, of course. It's one of the four great Lukan Christmas canticles. It puts into picture language the work of Christ and includes Mary's wonderful confession, "My spirit rejoices in God, my Savior."

The proposal of the text might be: Two believing women, both chosen for their mothering roles by the Lord, confess the blessings of the coming King.

With a solid understanding of the day's Gospel, the preacher moves ahead to his text.

Study the Text

It's not necessary to review all the points of a Hebrews 10 text study here; a few points are enough. The proposal of the text is that Christ identifies himself as the perfect sacrifice for sin and as the one pointed to by the Old Testament temple sacrifices. It was important to notice vv. 1-4 and especially v. 4: "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." If not the blood of bulls and goats, then what will take away sins?

The answer is in the text. In vv. 5-7 the writer places the words of David in Psalm 40 into the mouth of Christ. In vv. 8-10 the writer comments on the words of Christ. In both sections we note the truth that God does not accept the temple sacrifices as the final payment for sin. Christ through David makes three points concerning what does serve as the final payment for sin:

The body you have given me

My status as the one chosen and promised one (written about in the scroll)

I have come to do your will, my God

The writer's comments review the statements of Christ and then he concludes: "By that will we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."

What is striking here is the Savior's coming to do God's will by sacrificing his body cannot be limited to the Incarnation. His work is completed at the cross. I wondered how I could get Good Friday into a sermon preached six days before Christmas!

Observe the Points of Comparison

With both the Gospel and the Second Reading in front of me, I began to look for links and comparisons.

The most obvious was that Mary was carrying the body to be sacrificed. Another was that both Mary and Elizabeth were aware

of the will of God and of the child's place in the Old Testament Scriptures. The third was that both women understood this child to be bringing relief from sin and shame. I was not sure, however, that either woman understood at this point that the birth and body they were rejoicing in would eventually end up in a bloody death on a cruel cross. Finally, I considered that I could hardly overlook the *Magnificat* in this sermon.

You can't ask a man what it's like to be pregnant. He can tell you what his wife tells him about being pregnant, but that's not the same. So I can't tell you what Mary was thinking or feeling those first weeks after Gabriel's visit. It seems like she needed to talk. The Gospel for today tells us that she went to see Elizabeth. It seems to have been a good choice. Elizabeth was an older relative, probably a confidant, and the news was that Elizabeth was pregnant too. So Mary headed south a hundred miles to spend time with Elizabeth. Was she more tired than usual? Did she have morning sickness? Feel a heartbeat? Was she showing? We don't know. We do know this: This baby inside her was her baby, but he was also God's baby, God's Son. So we can be pretty sure that this baby was the center of Mary's world.

Right now, this baby is the center of our world too. We're six days from Christmas and Christmas is about a baby. Page through the Christmas hymns in the hymnal, new one or old one. The baby is everywhere. Look at the manger scenes in churches; the baby is always in the middle. You come to church on Christmas Eve and the focus is on a baby lying in a manger. This is the way it needs to be. We need to remember who the baby Jesus is. At the instant of his conception in Mary's womb this baby already was God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. And from exactly the same instant he was also truly and fully human. On Christmas Day St. John will remind us that **the divine Word became flesh**—incarnate: in the flesh—**and made his dwelling among us**. And that's why this baby is the center of Christmas.

So Mary went to see Elizabeth and sang a song about her baby. We call it the *Magnificat*, a word that means to magnify or to glorify. Mary sang, **My soul glorifies the Lord**. But she didn't stop there; she kept singing, **and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior**. To Mary, there was more here than a pregnancy, more than a birth, more than a baby. Mary understood that the incarnation wouldn't end in Bethlehem. In her body Mary felt a baby; with her faith Mary saw a Savior. And that's why this baby was the center of her world. And that's why this baby is also the center of our faith.

Create the Structure and Write the Sermon

I decided to lead off with Mary and focus on the little body that was alive and growing inside her. I made the point that the incarnation needed to lead to the crucifixion. The theme is "Sing Your Christmas Carols at the Cross."

Just like Mary, we sing Christmas songs at this time of the year and we all have our favorites. The Second Reading for today, from the letter to the Hebrews, reminds us that there is more to Christmas than the birth of a baby. We are all looking ahead to Christmas today, but we also need to look beyond Christmas. So I say:

"Sing Your Christmas Carols at the Cross."

The first part of the sermon was a pretty standard exposition of the Hebrews text. I explained the context of the letter, the problems which caused the author to write it, and the remedy to the problem he put forward. I explained the text verse by verse. I concluded: Whether you're an Old Testament believer or a New Testament believer, obeying God's law never solves the problem of sin. Obedience can't earn you forgiveness. Neither animal sacrifices nor personal sacrifices ever get rid of hell.

So what did get rid of sin and hell? Christ speaking through David again: **A body you prepared for me**. That's what would do it. So here's the baby Jesus! The Son of God who was in the beginning, who was with God, who was God, this divine being wrapped himself in a human body: First a fertilized egg, then an embryo, then blood and veins and bones and skin. Then emotions and intelligence, then the sense of pleasure and pain. This is the baby born in Bethlehem. This is the incarnation: God took on flesh and blood. God became a baby. And his parents named him Jesus.



But he didn't stay a baby or a boy or teenager. **Then I said**—Christ speaking again—**Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll.** The Old Testament scrolls were filled with promises that a Messiah would come from God. This boy named Jesus was God's choice. **Then I said, I have come to do your will, my God.** The writer repeats this to make the point: **Then he said, Here I am. I have come to do your will.**

*I explained that the will of God is to save the world from sin. I said, The Son of God took on a body to do what God willed and what God wanted. I detailed the need for Jesus to be a human being and then repeated the point: Jesus did what God wanted; he carried out God's will. And so his incarnation led to his crucifixion. And now the writer concludes: **And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.***

Application followed. This body came for each of you sitting in these pews. This body for each child, each grandchild, each neighbor, each friend. This body stood in place of all bodies everywhere on the globe. Holy? Yes, holy! Your sins cleansed, your slate clean, your guilt abolished, your condemnation dismissed, the devil defeated, and his hell destroyed. Holy? Yes, holy! Your prayers heard, your sadness lifted, your sickness explained, your lives empowered, your future secure, your heaven guaranteed. And all because the Son of God became a baby in a body. And now you know why Mary sang: **My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.**

When Mary went to visit Elizabeth, she didn't know the details. She couldn't have foreseen the shepherds at the stable or the gifts of the magi. She probably wondered what old Simeon meant when he told her that **a sword would pierce her soul.** She couldn't have imagined a crucifixion; she couldn't have handled the thought of seeing her baby die. But she certainly saw the victory. And so Mary sang with a mother's heart, but she also sang with a believer's heart. (*Here I quoted vv. 50-54.*) The baby she was carrying would be the central figure of history and what he would do would be the turning of history. Nothing would ever be the same. And it all happened, not just with a baby's cry in a manger but with the Savior's cry from the cross: **It is finished.**

And that's why we sing our Christmas carols at the cross. The crucifixion comes along with the incarnation. The Son of God took on a human body to become the Savior of the world. And so, he took away your sins, too. The man who wrote to the Hebrews had to remind them of this. And he needs to remind us, too. So when we sing sweet carols like "Away in a Manger" or "Silent Night" or "Angels We Have Heard on High," we must see the whole story. We must look beyond the ox and the ass and the swaddling clothes; we must see the cross and the nails and crown of thorns. We must see the life he lived for us and the death he died for us. And then we will see what Mary is seeing now: Her son as the risen and reigning Savior who hears her sing with all the saints and angels of heaven. And those songs sound forever.

If the reader is interested in trying this concept, look ahead to the Proper for Easter 5 in Year C. The sermon is based on Acts 11:1-18. The Gospel for that day is John 13:31-34. That's the Proper I'll be writing about in the next article of this series.

¹ *Expositional* preaching, as I use the term in this group of preaching styles, has a more specific definition than I use in this paragraph. It is popular among conservative Evangelicals whose worship patterns do not include the guidance of the church year, the Proper, and the lectionary. The usual approach is to take a longer section of Scripture (perhaps even an entire book in a series of sermons) and work through it verse by verse as one might in a Bible class. Expository preaching certainly can exposit a text and propose a theme. How well it fits in the liturgical rite is another question. I did not add *topical* preaching to my list. While it may propose a truth, it does not exposit a text.



Peter's Vision as found in Acts:11:1-18