

An excerpt from "Preaching the Word: Homiletics" by Raymond F. Collins that appears in *Emmanuel* 115:2 (2009) 170-186.

Augustine's famous commentary on the Our Father appears in his letter to Proba. In the letter, the great theologian of the Christian West's first millennium explains each of the prayer's petitions and then shows how each of them corresponds to something in the Old Testament. He concludes, "If you study every word of the petitions of Scripture, you will find, I think, nothing that is not contained and included in the Lord's Prayer."

In somewhat similar fashion the scriptural readings for the Lenten and Easter seasons indicate that the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus fulfill what is written in the Old Testament.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

March 1, 2009

LITURGY

1 Peter 3:18-22 uses the flood narrative as a symbolic foreshadowing of salvation through the waters of baptism.

Mark 1:12-15 is a short narrative that describes Jesus being tempted by Satan, then going into Galilee to preach the gospel.

Genesis 9:8-15 is the first reading of the Lenten Sunday liturgy.

Its placement at the beginning of Lent serves as a reminder that the Lenten season is a season of covenant renewal.

The biblical narrative suggests that we think about the reestablishment of the created order after the destruction of the punishment that God had meted out in response to human sin. The renewal is guaranteed by a divine covenant established by God with Noah and his sons. The biblical covenants are not typical bilateral agreements; rather they formalize the relationship between a superior, God, and an inferior, in this case Noah and his sons (see Gen 6:10; 9:18-19).

The covenant with Noah does not enjoy the same degree of historicity as do God's later covenants with his people. In the priestly tradition three major covenants separate the major eras of God dealing with his people, the covenant with Noah (Gen 9:8-15), the covenant with Abraham (Gen 17:1-27), and the Mosaic covenant at the time of the Exodus (Exod 31:12-17). The priestly author of Genesis 9 uses the covenant motif to place the idea of the covenant in the broadest possible perspective.

From the perspective of the superior partner in the covenant, it is noteworthy that this is a divine covenant. God takes the initiative in establishing a covenant with Noah and his descendants. It is also noteworthy that this is an eternal covenant (vv. 11-12, 15). God will never again wreak such vengeance on human kind.

From the perspective of the inferior partner, the covenant is established with Noah and his sons, symbolizing the entire human race. The covenant is also an ecological covenant. Protection is afforded to all living creatures, so that every kind of animal—birds, tame animals, and wild animals—is preserved from extinction

(vv. 10, 12, 15). Finally, the earth itself is promised divine protection (v. 13).

The token of the covenant is itself a natural phenomenon, the rainbow that appears in the sky after a torrential downpour. The Hebrew term "bow" (or "rainbow") designates the weapon used by soldiers and deities at war. The Hebrew tradition occasionally pictured Yahweh as wielding a bow, particularly when shooting arrows of lightning (Ps 7:12-13; Lam 2:4; Hab 3:9). The placement of a (rain)bow in the sky symbolizes that with the covenant, as intended by God, a time of death and destruction is replaced by a time of life and peace.

BROKEN FOR US

A cursory reading of today's three scriptures reveals that there is some relationship between the first and second readings but not between the first and third readings. Its link to the second reading is specifically with 1 Peter 3:20, which mentions Noah and the Flood. The author of the epistle may have been thinking of those who died at the time of the Flood when he wrote about Christ preaching to the spirits in prison (1 Pet 3:19). The idea of Jesus' preaching to the spirits is recalled in the Apostles' Creed, "He descended to the dead."

That the church places Genesis' narration of the natural covenant at the beginning of Lent reminds us that our Lenten perspective must extend beyond ourselves. In the season of Lent we should be attentive to the vital needs of all human beings, as symbolized by the text's mention of the sons of Noah. In the season of Lent, we must also be attentive to the environment, the habitat in which we live, so that it will be life-supporting for all God's creatures.

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

March 8, 2009

LITURGY

Romans 8:31b-34 speaks of the death and resurrection of Jesus as well as his intercession on our behalf.

Mark 9:2-10 gives Mark's version of the transfiguration of Jesus.

Genesis 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18 tells the story of the Binding of Isaac, the *Akedah*, Abraham's would-be sacrifice of his son Isaac.

The story, one of the poignant and problematic narratives in the Bible, was often cited by the Fathers of the Church as a type of the sacrificial death of Jesus.

The narrative's mixture of divine names, Elohim and Yahweh, seems to indicate that at an early stage of the tradition, the story was told as an argument against child sacrifice (cf. Deut 12:31; Jer 7:30-32). Faithful to the gods of his polytheistic tradition, Abraham was willing to sacrifice his only son as a holocaust, a practice not unknown in Ancient Mesopotamia and among Israel's neighbors (Exod 22:29-30; Ezek 20:25-26). Yahweh, however, intervened. The God of Israel did not demand the life of the first born; his claim upon the firstborn could be and should

be satisfied by the substitution of an animal for the child (Exod 13:2, 11-16; 22:29; 34:29-20). Child sacrifice is immoral. Child-sacrifice is, moreover, a contradiction of the genuine worship of the living God.

In its final redaction the story is told so as to emphasize Abraham's absolute obedience to God. The extent and depth of Abraham's obedience is underscored in his willingness to sacrifice his only son, the child of promise in whom the people's future would be realized. The scene is set on Mount Moriah, a setting that later Jewish tradition identified with Jerusalem's temple mount (cf. 2 Chr 3:1). The story is told in vivid and dramatic detail so as to underscore the extent of Abraham's faith. He was willing to risk everything, even his most precious "firstborn" son, so confident was he in the divine promise.

The patriarch's unwavering faith in God would serve as an example to Israel throughout its history, inspiring the Israelites to remain faithful to Yahweh despite seemingly insurmountable odds in the most excruciating of circumstances. Israel could not stake its hope for the future in what it controlled; the ground of its hope was in what God had promised.

BROKEN FOR US

As was the case on the First Sunday of Advent, the link between today's first and second readings is clear whereas there is no link between the first and third readings except for the fact that all three readings speak about an only Son.

Today's first reading dramatically underscores the depth of Abraham's faith and hope in God. The second reading underscores the depth of God's love for us. God so loved the world that he did not spare his only son (cf. John 3:16). The extent of Abraham's faith is almost incomprehensible; how much more beyond the ability of the human mind to comprehend is God's willingness to sacrifice his Son. Jesus died, but Isaac did not.

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

March 15, 2009

LITURGY

1 Corinthians 1:22-25 describes the cross of Christ as a manifestation of the wisdom of God.

John 2:13-25 gives the Fourth Gospel's version of the cleansing of the temple, a narrative programmatically placed at the beginning of the Gospel narrative.

Exodus 20:1-17 gives the story of the Ten Commandments.

It has long been recognized that the Bible's presentation of the Ten Commandments essentially follows the pattern of ancient suzerainty pacts by stipulating the superior's claim to the loyalty of the inferior party, spelling out the inferior party's obligations to the superior party, and then identifying the obligations that the members of the subordination nation had towards the superior monarch.

Yahweh's covenant with Israel follows upon his liberation of

Israel at the time of the Exodus. That event brought freedom to Israel and "earned" for Yahweh the unmitigated allegiance of the people. The first series of covenant stipulations is phrased positively--apart from the first, "You shall not have other gods besides me"--just as they were in the ancient treaties. The older Exodus version of the Ten Commandments has four commandments in the first series, beginning with the commandment to be loyal to the only God of Israel and ending with the commandment to set aside the sabbath day as a day of rest. The lectionary version of the text omits Exodus' etiological explanation of the sabbath rest (vv. 9-11) as well as the ban on idol worship (vv. 4-6).

The later Deuteronomic version of the Ten Commandments (Deut 5:1-21) has seven commandments in the second series. Deuteronomy 5:21 creates two commandments out of the one final commandment in Exodus. One commandment forbids the coveting of a neighbor's wife; the other forbids the coveting of a neighbor's household. Exodus has a ban on coveting a neighbor's household, of which the wife is a member. Deuteronomy's revision of the Decalogue led to the Catholic tradition of 3+7 commandments whereas the Protestant tradition generally considers the commandments in a 4+6 grouping.

As was the case with the ancient treaties, the second series of covenant stipulations bears upon the obligations of the members of the nation to one another. These stipulations are generally formulated in the negative, "You shall not," as is the case with the Ten Commandments.

In the political world which produced the ancient suzerainty pacts, the negative commandments regulated the internal affairs of the nation so that, as a whole, it could fulfill its obligations to the great monarch. The inspired religious genius of Israel used the covenant formulary to remind the Israelites that their obligations to one another were part and parcel of their relationship to Yahweh. When he was asked about the greatest commandment in the Law, Jesus, heir to this tradition, responded by underscoring the inherent unity of our obligations to God and our obligations (Mark 12:29; cf. Matt 22:28-30; Luke 10:27).

BROKEN FOR US

The Old Testament reading for the Third Sunday of Lent has no obvious relationship with either the second or third liturgical readings. The homilist should not try to force a relationship where none exists.

A homily that focuses on the first reading can be developed in a number of ways. The most obvious lesson to be learned is the unity of our religious and our moral duties. In the Judeo-Christian tradition the two belong together: our obligations to God devolve into obligations to others (cf. Gal 5:6), obligations to others are ultimately a way of being faithful to God.

Another way to approach the text is for the homilist to remind the congregation that we cannot pick and choose among the commandments. We ought not to be "Cafeteria Catholics," either from the right or from the left. James 2:8-13 contains a good reflection on those who would pick and choose.

A third tack might be to focus the homily on one or another commandment but the homilist must be wary lest he focus on one of

his favorite commandments, generally the fifth or the sixth, to the neglect of the others.

A fourth approach might speak about the commandments from the perspective of their being stipulations of the covenant. This would present the commandments within a Lenten context. Lent began with an account of the covenant with Noah; it concludes with Jesus' inauguration of the new covenant.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

March 22, 2009

LITURGY

Ephesians 2:4-10 speaks of the innumerable riches of the grace of God manifested in Christ Jesus.

John 3:14-21, the major portion of Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus, suggests that the bronze serpent lifted up on a pole at the time of the Exodus (Num 21:4-9) can be seen as a foreshadowing of the salvific lifting up of Jesus on the cross (John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32-34).

2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23 is the final passage in the Chronicler's two-volume work. According to the arrangement of the Hebrew Bible, the passage is the final passage in the Bible.

Unlike the narrative in the Book of Kings which he used as his source (2 Kgs 24:18-20), the Chronicler speaks not only of the king but also of the sin of the priests and the people. The entire nation is corrupt, as is evident in their following the abominable practices of the idol-worshipping neighbors and defiling the temple, the house of Yahweh in Jerusalem.

Their greatest sin was their failure to heed the words of the prophets, the messengers of God to Judah. This specification of their sin, echoing the words of Jeremiah (Jer 26:20-24; 29:16-20; 35:14-15), referenced in verse 21 (see Jer 25:11-12; 29:10), is a frequent theme in 2 Chronicles (cf. 2 Chr 12:5-8; 15:1-8; 19:1-3; 21:12-15; 25:7-9; 35:17).

God's judgment on unfaithful Israel is described in dramatic and devastating fashion. The extent of Judah's sin and of God's punishment is underscored by the five-fold use of "all" in the narrative (vv. 14 [2x], 19 [2x], 21). The temple and the Holy City would be destroyed by fire. Their precious artifacts were destroyed or taken as booty (cf. verse 18, omitted by the lectionary). Those who were not killed in the razing of the city were carried off into enslavement in Babylon. This is what Jeremiah had predicted.

The punishment would last for seventy years, a round number which may indicate the period between the destruction of the First Temple and the dedication of the Second (587-516 BCE). The exile was a purifying process. The land that lay fallow for seventy years atoned for seventy years of sabbath neglect (Lev 26:34-39).

This saga of sin and punishment ends on a note of hope. The final words of the Hebrew Bible repeat Ezra 1:1-3a, a decree of Cyrus the Great (Cyrus II) in 538 BCE. The temple will be rebuilt; the people will return to the Holy City.

BROKEN FOR US

Once again there is no correlation among today's three scriptural readings. Each of them, independently, articulates a Lenten theme.

The dramatic story told by the Chronicler is worth preaching on. It portrays the infectious character of sin. The sin of the people's leaders seeps into religious institutions and into the people themselves. More than one example of such seepage can easily be cited in recent times. To cite only two, one might mention the evil wrought by the Nazi regime during World War II or the greed and deceit in our own country in recent years.

Sin inevitably results in a devastating punishment, yet God constantly holds out a hope for recovery and salvation. We should learn from our history, particularly an episode in history that is so important that it appears as the conclusion to the Hebrew Bible.

While it is preferable to preach on the whole story, some homilists might want to offer a microcosmic version of the Chronicler's tale. Sin is part of everyone's life. Sin, it seems, begets sin. Lent is a time for self-inflicted atonement. Then comes the hope of Easter, when all of us rejoice in the salvation that God has brought about.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

March 29, 2009

LITURGY

Hebrews 5:7-9 is virtually a cameo description of Jesus' prayer and obedience to the Father, resulting in eternal salvation for those who are faithful to Jesus.

John 12:20-33 describes Jesus' response to Philip and Andrew in which he uses the metaphor of the dying and fruitful seed to speak of his death and exaltation.

Jeremiah 31:31-34 is a two-part oracle that speaks of the new covenant which God will make with the entire nation, that is, both the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom. Scholars debate among themselves as to whether the promised covenant is really a new covenant.

Christian commentators have frequently taken the text to mean that the covenant will be completely new. This easily leads opens the way for people to believe that Christianity supersedes Judaism. Sometimes motivated by the desire to avoid that unwanted consequence, many scholars hold that the prophet is speaking about the renewed Mosaic covenant.

A recent commentator, Jack R. Lundbom (*Jeremiah 21-36* [AB 21B. New York: Doubleday, 2004], 466) holds that the covenant, albeit in continuity with the Mosaic covenant, is really new since it marks a new situation in the relationship between God and humans. His reasons: 1) it is given without conditions; 2) it is written in the hearts of people; 3) it is grounded in a gratuitous act of grace.

The first oracle contrasts the new covenant with the old covenant. The old covenant was made—the technical expression, twice used in the Hebrew text, is "cut a covenant—with the nation's fathers, that is, the people of the Exodus generation, but it had been broken by the lesser party to the covenant.

Recent commentators tend not to agree with the interpretation of the text reflected in the NAB translation: "They broke my covenant and I had to show myself their master." The Hebrew text connotes something like: "They broke the covenant of mine, even though I was their husband." This rendition better brings out the idea that Yahweh is the superior party in the covenant and that a marital relationship existed between Yahweh and Israel. To appreciate the nuance of the Hebrew text, one might note that *berith*, meaning covenant, also designates the marriage covenant and that *baal*, meaning lord or master, was also used of a husband by his wife.

The second oracle highlights the traditional priestly covenant formula, "I will be their God and they shall be my people, and describes the new covenant. Its most salient feature is that it will be written on the heart, "on the interior intentionality of the people," writes William L. Holladay (*Jeremiah 2* [Hermeneia. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989], 198). Consequently the people will freely and gladly respond to God's will, no rebellion being in their heart. No longer will their obedience be merely external and formal.

Deuteronomic law required the Israelite to teach the law to his children (Deut 11:9). Rabbinic tradition cited teaching the Torah as among a father's primary responsibilities, along with teaching his sons a trade and finding wives for them. "Knowing the Lord" sums up the covenant obligation. Often, however, teachers did not teach the truth about Yahweh (cf. Jer 9:4-5). With the internalized law, teachers have become virtually superfluous. Since the terms of the new covenant will be written on people's hearts, they will not need teachers in order to know Yahweh and fulfill the covenant.

Another important feature of the new covenant is that it is a covenant of forgiveness. "This is," writes Lundbom (*Jeremiah 21-36*, 470), "the really new element in the new covenant." The God of the new covenant is a God who forgives sins and transgressions.

His forgiveness extends from "the least to the greatest." Many see in this expression reference to the young and the old but it is more likely a reference to social class meaning from the poor to the rich, from the least powerful to the most powerful.

BROKEN FOR US

By the fifth week of Lent, the homilist has certainly come to the realization that the compilers of the Lenten liturgical readings made little effort to establish a link among the readings. Today's first reading stands on its own in articulating a powerful biblical motif. Its language was appropriated in the New Testament especially in the Institution narrative (Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; see also 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 8:8; 9:15).

Among the possible approaches to preaching the text is one

that focuses on the continuity of God's renewed covenantal relationship with his people. Another way of approaching the text is to focus on the dispositions of the parties to the new covenant, joyful and willing obedience on the part of humans, mercy and forgiveness on the part of God.