

## Preaching in Lent Biblical Images of the Lord that Still Speak to Us Today

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Lent is a time of 40 week days and six Sundays whose deepest precedents are the great festivals of Israel. The Christian liturgical calendar fixes on a pattern of saving events (Christ's Advent, birth, baptism, suffering, death, and resurrection, plus the Pentecost giving of the Holy Spirit) whose rhythm is not seasonal but soteriological.

Lent itself is sometimes narrowly interpreted as the time of Jesus' desert fasting, with his suffering and death then distinguished from Lent as Passiontide and Good Friday. But in these remarks, I won't make that distinction. I will be speaking broadly to such Passion themes as suffering, compassion, mockery, humility, and silence before accusers.

Some of the remarks I make will be explicitly relevant to particular common lectionary texts – for instance, Philippians 2, 1 Corinthians 1 (the low, the weak, and the foolish), Mark 8, John 3, Mark 15, and Isaiah 50. Other comments I make will be on other texts. But that's OK: some of us will choose non-lectionary texts for our Lenten sermons, and in any case the themes and images I present will, I believe, have broad relevance to themes and images that are in the lectionary.

What I'm going to do is this: I will start with just a few remarks about traditional preaching schemes in Lent. Then I will begin a series of 16 or so images and themes; these will all be clusters. Each will have a discernible center, but then – especially those I develop at some length-many will have radiants that go in various directions. Always the suggestions will be governed by judgments as to

whether there are good homiletical possibilities in the image and themes clusters, and in every case I will try to say what I think some of these possibilities are. In other words, how interesting, how apt, how powerful, how redolent is this image or theme for preaching in Lent?

You will be reassured to know that little of what I have to offer is original with me. The sobering discovery one always makes in assembling materials for an occasion like this is that you serve best by offering other people's wisdom. It's one of the advantages of being a member of a Christian community and an heir to Christian tradition. So I shall be serving you more as a hunter/gatherer than as inventor-more like the Neo-orthodox Adam and Eve and less like Tubal Cain. Accordingly, I invite you to use the material that's offered in any way that you find helpful.

Two more preliminary remarks. *First*, I will be citing and, part of the time, commenting on people many of you know – C. S. Lewis, for example, and Frederick Buechner. I make no apology for this. The reason is that, like many of you, though I have read these authors for years, they are rich enough that you forget some of the accents and angles of vision in them that will preach – particularly, you forget them in connection with some particular agenda – like preaching in Lent.

*Second* comment: if here and there I fish in some beds that you have already fished out, I believe all is not lost. For sometimes it happens that even though a suggestion for preaching is itself already familiar to you, and therefore already used, the way this suggestion

is framed, or its framing in some new context, may stimulate some line of thought that's new and ripe with homiletic possibilities. Of course novelty isn't a virtue unless combined with Biblical faithfulness. Probably all of us recall sermons that seemed especially profound because they sounded simultaneously new and old – that is, they helped us hear the Scriptures as if for the first time, but gave us unmistakably the impression that what we heard there came from a depth not of years, but of centuries.

Let me begin by recalling that traditionally preachers in my own country have tried to organize Lenten preaching in several ways. Some follow the lectionary, of course. In the Reformed tradition, some have tried to work through some of the relevant materials in the Heidelberg Catechism – especially in the Deliverance Section, and most especially in the questions and answers that deal with the events of Christ within the Apostles' Creed. Fair enough.

People have also done prophecy-fulfillment schemes, working through the Servant songs of Isaiah, or the strange and angular deliverances of Hosea. I will say something about Hosea later. In addition, such OT figures as Job, Jeremiah, Moses, and Isaiah are often typological in interesting ways—though here, of course, especially if we draw the parallels woodenly, we run the danger of mere predictability. Another possibility: follow a particular gospel account clear through from Jesus' turn toward Jerusalem to his death (e.g. Lk. 9:51). By the way, later I will comment on Lk. 9:51. Some preachers across the years, in the dauntless search for freshness, have tried schemes like: "Figures Around the Cross." Or "Figures in Passiontide." So you'll get a sermon on Judas or on Pilate or on the Roman Centurion in Mark 15, who said "Surely this man was the Son of God," or maybe on Barabbas.

A former student of mine, now a preacher, once tried a surprising and interesting approach to a main Lenten theme by working imaginatively with Barabbas in Matthew 27:15-

26. Barabbas is a notorious thug who gets into the gospel because of Pilate's dithering, but maybe there is a bit more to him and to his situation than we usually assume. In Matthew's gospel, as you recall, we are told that it was Pilate's custom at Passover to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. Matthew says this:

So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" "Barabbas," they answered. "What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?" Pilate asked. They all answered, "Crucify him!" And so Pilate washes his hands, releases Barabbas, and turns Jesus over to be flogged and crucified.

O.K. There's the gospel. Now the sermon I heard about has an opening scene in which people are all milling about in the streets. And the preacher imaginatively identifies with some of these people. Who are they? Why are they there? What brings them to this place at this time?

But then the sermon moves to the nearby prison where Barabbas is being kept. He's a rough, vengeful figure. He lives above the law and likes it up there. He hears the noise of the crowd. He can tell it's a nasty crowd. He knows Pilate's in town. He hears the crescendo of crowd noise and his blood begins to run a little hotter and his interest mounts. He senses that the crowd has a whiff of blood and that somebody's life is in the balance.

Barabbas turns his ear to an opening in the wall. He can hear half the dialog between Pilate and the crowd. He can hear the crowd's responses. What he can't hear is Pilate's questions. He can't hear Pilate ask the crowd who they want released, Jesus or Barabbas. He can't hear that. All he hears – the first thing he hears, and it stabs him like a knife – is the crowd's shouting his name: Barabbas! He can't hear Pilate's intervening question about Jesus. The next thing Barabbas hears is the crowd's cry for blood: "Crucify him!"

Barabbas! Crucify him! And now Barabbas's blood runs cold. He figures he's a goner. He knows he's a loser. He thinks back over

his life, and traces its course. And then he hears a guard come, and hears the key in the lock. And the guard says, "Well, Barabbas, this is your big day. Are you ready to go?" And Barabbas says he's ready to die. "You're not going to die!" the guard says. Some Jew carpenter is going to the cross instead of you and you're going free. He's dying in your place!"

And then the sermon concludes with some ruminations that identify us with Barabbas and with the vicarious grace that saves us as well as him.

I happen to find this pretty imaginative and moving. But, of course, the danger you court here is of preaching not Bible, but Bible fiction. This is the famous problem with preaching figures around the cross. Somebody homes in on Simon of Cyrene, for instance, the man pressed into service to carry Jesus' cross. You hear about his childhood, about who the Cyrenes were, about how Simon had coincidentally developed his muscular frame by hoisting sacks of grain on his uncle's farm, and so on. That is, you find out what brought this figure to the Via Dolorosa on Good Friday and into contact with Jesus of Nazareth.

The problem, of course, is that all this is made up out. The preacher ignores the biblical writer's purpose in mentioning Simon of Cyrene, and instead tells you far more about this figure than any Bible writer ever knew.

So probably we ought to go another way.

### Images for Lent

So much by way of introduction. Let me now pass on to say something about images in general, and then begin the series of image and theme clusters that are the main business of the essay.

In a fascinating book, *The Iconoclastic Deity*, Clyde Holbrook says some things about biblical imagery for God that I think will be helpful for us to think about.<sup>1</sup> Exodus 20:4, the second commandment, prohibits physical

images of God on the ground that God is properly jealous. God brooks no rivals. God never wants to be in a position where he has to sue some idol for alienation of affection. And, of course, the second and first commandments are so sensitively linked that a violation of the second tends to become a violation of the first. The person who fashions some tangible aid to worship may soon become fascinated with the thing itself. This thing in effect enters the marriage between God and a person and becomes a part of it. The covenant marriage between God and his people thus threatens to become some perverse and destructive *menage-à-trois*.

But physical images are only one sort: behind them, and beside them, lurk certain mental images of God. So Paul in Acts 17:29 says to the Athenians that they must not think of God as "like gold or silver or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of human beings." God does not spring from our imagination, but we from his. Our images of God may therefore be dangerous, or deceiving, or corrupting, or merely bland, but in any case they are unauthorized. They're only speculative.

Curiously, the Scripture themselves bristle with images of God. God is a rock, a light, a fountain, a brook (Jeremiah suggests peevishly at one point that God might be a deceiving brook – a mere mirage in the wilderness) a fortress, bread, a refuge, a high tower, a horn of salvation, a mother, a father, a king, an eagle, a lion (Hosea 5:14). In Hosea, we discover that the consuming God, the spoiler of fools is said to be a moth in a summer closet of wool, or dry rot in timbers (5:12). In Isaiah 7:18, God is a whistler.

Such images tell us what we naturally know, namely, that even authorized images for God, ones that appear in our community book, may be strange, against-the-grain kinds of things that will surely mislead us if we use them unwisely. That's just the nature of images. They may move and delight us. But sometimes they deceive and distort. Images

<sup>1</sup> Clyde A. Holbrook, *The Iconoclastic Deity: Biblical Images of God* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1984).

are powerful things. And so it is with human images of God, including the authorized ones in the inspired Scriptures. They have to be handled with care.

A main reason is that biblical images for God do give us some purchase on God, but they all come, as Holbrook says, with a gap between them and the reality they portray. There is always a distance, a transcendence, an absolutely incorrigible elusiveness about God that resists simple translation and perfect depiction.

Yet on the other hand, the images must connect in some way with transcendent reality. They must tell us something about God. That is, images of God, and not just propositions about God, do have a role in revelation. They do not create reality but imitate it, represent it. Images are revealing, even if only obliquely.

It is in the midst of this wonderful paradox that we ought to think of Lenten images of God, and of Jesus Christ, and of suffering and atonement.

Images do represent reality, but they do this in a way that accommodates, that approximates. Images always limit our gaze to one facet, one surface of the reality. A biblical writer wants to hold up some one or two aspects of God or of suffering that are illuminated by the image, but wants to bracket the others. Thus, as Holbrook says, “God portrayed as a rock tells us God endures and God protects – not that God is heavy or inanimate.” And, of course, we know the corollaries. Christ as the lamb of God accents not the stupidity of sheep, but their docility and vulnerability. Images are always aspectival. That is why if you were asked by some earnest inquirer the question, Who is God?, it would be merely eccentric and misleading of you to reply that God is a whistler.

Now we all know that. We know images are limiting. But this very feature of an image – that it focusses our gaze and our attention – this feature permits an image to penetrate. An image may focus light like a laser and there-

fore gather enormous energy that lets it pierce us and our listeners.

Or, to change the image for images, an image is like a base tone in a natural harmonic series – it emits overtones. Images never just reflect – they also portray, and evoke. They open up some aspect of reality but do so in an exceedingly compact and suggestive way.

Take, for example, the way a Bible writer evokes God’s providence. As Leland Ryken points out<sup>2</sup> an earnest, but uninspired, author of the Westminster Confession might instruct us thusly:

God the creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his wise and most holy providence.

An inspired biblical poet says simply, “The Lord is my Shepherd.”

It sounds simple, but isn’t. And in this evocative simplicity, this suggestive simplicity, lies the power of images for our Lenten preaching. All of them simultaneously mislead and reveal; all lie and tell the truth at the same time. As Holbrook says, they are thus like perspective in painting: they both distort and convey truth. The wise preacher will therefore always treat images with the respect they deserve, recognizing their power, letting them do their work without being translated immediately into something more propositional but less visually powerful. The patient preacher will let a scriptural image dwell in his sermon, abide in it. He won’t cash them out too fast, but let them sit and radiate as images.

I now want to suggest a number of biblical images that I think pack the sort of wallop I just mentioned, and that naturally suggest kindred themes and images. These are in no particular order.

I begin with two from Fred Craddock, *Preaching*.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985).

## 1

In John's gospel we find a combination of thoughts that is peculiar to the fourth gospel and also generically peculiar. I mean the combination of shame and glory in the picture of Jesus as glorified, as exalted, as lifted up – but on a cross (esp. 13:31-32). It's like being enthroned in an electric chair. It's like luxuriating in a gas chamber. For John the crucifixion is, so to speak, the first ten feet of Jesus' ascension into heaven. The darkness from noon till three conceals the glory of the cross.

Why? Because Jesus where he is lifted up will draw all humans to himself (12:32). This torture instrument has strange magnetic power. It attracts human beings. How? Is it morbid fascination—the kind of thing that always brought crowds to a public hanging? Is it the unspoken awareness, the almost holiday awareness of spectators at a fatal crash that it is somebody else, not I, who is dying! Somebody else dying in my place? Somebody instead of me?

I just mentioned that the classic text is 12:32. Here, in 12:31 just preceding, and in 16:11, a corollary text, we are told that the cross crucifies the prince of this world: the cross exorcises, condemns, crosses out the prince of this world.

Here is one series of overtones. Who is the prince of this world? Who is really being condemned and defeated here? And what does Pontius Pilate's trilingual joke have to do with it? "Shall I crucify your king?" Pilate asks in 19:15? Later in 19 there is elaborate, ironic confusion. Pilate's joke is that Jesus of Nazareth is the King of the Jews: but the earnest enemies of Jesus don't get it. So verse 21: "The chief priests protested to Pilate, 'Do not write 'The King of the Jews,' but rather that this man claimed to be king of the Jews.'" And no doubt Pilate is exasperated by these Jewish legalists—the sort of people to whom you always have to explain your jokes.

Who was crossed out that day? The Prince of this World, or a Man claiming to be king? Or the king of the Jews?

What's striking is that earlier John uses an image to depict the confusion between the Prince of this World and the Son of God. In chapter 3 – just before the famous verse 16, just before a patch of contrasting images of light and darkness, condemnation and vindication, good and evil, life and death – just before all that we read this, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up." (v. 14)

In this reference to Numbers 21:8, John uses surely one of the strangest images for our Lord in all Scripture. Jesus the Son of Man is a saving Snake. Venomous snakes and serpents in gardens may tempt, or may bite and kill, but Jesus the Saving snake, the Bronze Snake, the King Snake, is lifted up so that a long look will save. Looks may kill or looks may save. Here the solemn contemplation of a snake inoculates people with the only anti-venom that can preserve them.

This suggests a possible homiletic key: governments, as we know, occasionally reach into the ranks of the underworld in order to nab a particularly elusive and important crook—on the principle that it takes a thief to catch a thief. Just as forest rangers often have to fight fire with fire, just as parents and police administer small, controlled amounts of pain to protect against big, uncontrolled pain later by administering time-outs or traffic tickets, just as a vaccine of smallpox cells can protect you against smallpox, so death on the cross turns out to be the preventative of death. The best anti-toxin is a dose of the toxin itself. In the strange providence of God it takes an evil event to defeat evil. It takes Christ as snake to crush the head of the Serpent, and Christ as defeated king to defeat the Prince of this World.

It's all what C. S. Lewis would call "deep magic." Death as a producer of life makes no sense rationally; a bronze snake as savior from snakes makes no sense, really, and yet there it is. Down deep at the springs and roots of the universe there is some inexplicable fittingness in death becoming the great preventative of

death, and some inexplicable fittingness that Christ the snake should crush the head of the serpent.

## 2

John 15:1-6 presents Christ as the vine and Christians, or community members, as the branches on the vine. And we have all heard seven sermons on the familiar themes of being connected to Christ, nourished by Christ, etc.

But the passage begins with a striking image of God as a gardener. Moreover, God is a gardener who walks along the vine with a pruning shears, lopping off certain branches and pruning others. Some of the pruning, if branches could talk, is excruciating. And yet the pain is for growth. These are growth pains. “He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.”

Craddock puts the sermon-generating question like this: when pain comes into our lives, are we being punished or pruned? Those who suffer want to know, if it is possible to know. Am I being punished or am I being prepared for something better?”

Here, surely, the testimonies of community members become relevant. I talked with a woman one whose health is almost surely gone, but who spoke with the quiet, sure accent of faith that we have all heard, here and there in the middle of suffering. That is, she was inclined to think that she was being not punished, but pruned, and that God the gardener has his ways of producing growth that may seem intolerable and inexplicable, but they are undeniable in Scripture and in, at least some, human experience.

### Four Pictures of the Passion of Christ

#### *The Steadfast Face*

“When the days drew near for him to be received up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” (Luke 9:51)

This is a picture of the infinite determination of our Lord. Jaw muscles tightened, teeth gritted, eyes narrowed – every line and muscle and crease tell us that this is a man on his way to die and that he knows it.

The right background is probably Leviticus 17 – God with his face set against anyone who eats bloody meat. Why? Why is God’s face set like that? Because blood is the life-fluid and life may not be casually consumed. But even more, because shed blood is a ransom—a payment to God. And God is dead set against anyone who profanes the ransom. God sets his face against them.

In Luke we have the turn toward the cross. (This text, by the way, Luke 9:51, would fit the first Sunday in Lent.) In it Luke picks out an ancient Hebraism to express the purpose, the resolution, the flint-like determination of the Son of Man: when the days drew near for him to be received up, he “set his face” to go to Jerusalem. All throughout Luke the drum keeps beating: The Son of Man must suffer. The Son of Man must die. In fact, from Genesis through Leviticus and Luke to Revelation there is this biblical theme written in blood across the pages of Scripture, namely, that typically when someone sins, someone pays. And the wages of sin is death.

It is never explained. It is just so. At the center of the universe, in the halls of heaven’s justice, according to the inscrutable will of God, when someone sins, someone pays. And so the axe must fall, the deep magic must be activated, sacrifice must be made, blood must be shed.

And all of this registers on the face of Jesus Christ, set like flint as he goes to Jerusalem. The steadfast face tells us that in death there is a horror against which even the Son of God must grit his teeth. His face tells us the road ahead is mined. He will walk without fanfare; he will chat with disciples and make little detours and linger briefly there or there, but there will be Jerusalem in his eyes and Caiaphas and the Roman politicians in his thoughts.

Here is the climax of God's lifetime determination to save people who skip town, or soil God's name, or meet God's overtures with vast indifference. The whole history of God's redemption is in the look, the fixed look, on the face of Jesus Christ. That look was there when a fleeing Moses is stopped in his tracks, it was there when David became tarnished and murderous. For a shifty Jacob, or a runaway Jonah, or a brilliant Jew named Saul-at the end of every corridor, around every corner-there again is the steadfast face of God. It was there when Jesus turned toward Jerusalem. And it was there when they crucified our Lord. Faces tell us things. And so does the steadfast face of God.

### *The Bent Knees*

In Luke 22:14-32 and John 13:1-5 we have main gospel descriptions of the Last Supper. One picture from John is that of Jesus on his knees in front of a row of dusty feet. Jesus is doing for the disciples what they wouldn't dream of doing for each other. After all they are all jockeying for position: they want to know which of them is to be considered the greatest. Twelve egos swell into each other's space; twelve egos bulge like balloons, and Jesus bends his knees, and says, "I am among you as one who serves."

The picture of the bent knee tells us of Jesus' humility, his down-to-earthness, and his readiness to serve such foolish persons as we, tin-pot lords trying to divide up his kingdom before his death.

Here's a place to see how the solemn ritual of the Lord's Supper is inserted into a world unlike the one Leonardo portrayed. We imagine the Last Supper scene as Leonardo painted it. Some of the disciples are drooping in sadness. Some are leaning eagerly toward the center of the table. There seems to be a kind of reverence and solemnity and sad nostalgia in the room.

It's all very moving. It just doesn't happen to be true. Surely it's not, at least, the whole picture. From Luke's account, it's plain that

the mood that night was touchy and quarrelsome. Forget piety and right feeling and a tender gathering of the saints. The bread is broken and the cup passed over talk of betrayal. Twelve fingers point and twelve mouths babble about betrayal. Then twelve disciples crowd and jostle around the question which of them was to be the greatest. It's the Lord's Supper in the Rough.

Now the remarkable thing is that the Supper itself tells us how much we need the Lord's broken body and shed blood. It's for people like this, people like us, people with degrees, and titles, and positions, people who dress up on Sunday and compare preaching styles with our rivals – people jockeying for position as the greatest – it's for people like us that our Lord bends his knees. "I am among you as one who serves."

In America, we live in an era in which "service" is often deceiving. There has never been a power-hungry politician who didn't refer to himself solemnly as "the servant of the people."

It's something of a shock for us to take service seriously. But here is the picture of it—the Lord of Glory on his knees humbly doing the servant's task.

Your attitude, says Paul, should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, as we've already seen, and now, also in John, taking the form of a servant.

### *Sacred Wounded Head*

In Matthew 27:27-31, we have another picture of our Lord's passion. Call it "Sacred, Wounded Head." In this little sub-series, we've had the steadfast face, the bent knee, and now the sacred, wounded head.

Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. They stripped him and put

a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand and knelt in front of him and mocked him. "Hail, King of the Jews," they said. They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

Here in this brief scene from Matthew we see one of the profoundest and darkest dimensions of our Lord's suffering. Here is a vile irony—that these bored Roman soldiers are amused by this demented carpenter from an unimportant corner of the Empire who thinks he's a king. He thinks he's royalty! He thinks he's better than we are! They set him up and go through their vile little circus routine, never seeing and never understanding that they were mocking the Lord of life, never seeing and never understanding that the blood on that wounded head was being offered for such wickedness as theirs.

What is this wickedness? Mockery. And the most brutally efficient kind of mockery is the sort that isolates some feature of another human being and then holds it up for study and group laughter. You isolate one then exaggerate what you find so ridiculously weak, or pretentious about another person.

So if you are a Nazi, you make a captured Rabbi preach; in the sixteenth century you could simultaneously mock and murder an Anabaptist by drowning him. (You believe in baptism by immersion? Here, get your fill of it.) You dress up a man like Jesus in a king's costume and then elaborately bow and scrape before him. They kneel before their king not in humility, but in mock humility.

A sermon on this passage, I suppose, could spend a good deal of time exploring mockery itself. I mean, suppose your angle of vision for the sermon is that Jesus, the suffering servant, was bearing our griefs and carrying our sorrows. In Isaiah 53:4 the point is that ignorant bystanders always suppose people get what they deserve: We consider a pathetic fool to

be stricken by God, smitten by God, and afflicted.

But no, he is bearing our griefs and carrying our sorrows. And mockery is one of the most painful griefs and one of the vilest sorrows we afflict on each other. Most 12-year-olds would rather be slugged than mocked. The reason is, of course, that human beings have been created in the image of God and therefore inherit a natural dignity. They possess by inheritance a center of gravity. Humans are naturally weighty and dignified creatures. Humans are royalty, according to Psalm 8:

You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; and put everything under his feet.

Humans deserve due respect. You may not spit on a person who wears a crown.

But we do. And so did the Roman soldiers. They crown him and spit on him and call him Your majesty.

Here is a picture of the passion of our Lord: he was suffering not only for our sins but from one of the most ingenious forms of sin. I would imagine a Lenten sermon on the sacred, wounded head — absurdly crowned with radiant spikes from a pricker bush and running with spit — I would imagine a sermon on this to have Isaiah 53 deep in its background mood:

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, Nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men. A man of sorrows and familiar with suffering.

And I would imagine a thoughtful sermon on this theme of mockery as another sorrow our Lord bears, I would imagine preparation for it to include the reading of some factual accounts of human mockery, for example, Johannes Neuhausler's book, *What Was it Like in the Concentration Camp at Dachau?*<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Johann Neuhausler, *What Was it Like in the Concentration Camp at Dachau?* (Trustees for Monument of Atonement, 1973).



Here you find examples of the Nazi fondness for mockery as a way of killing time and killing the spirits of prisoners. The camp commandant liked to lead camp visitors and officers to the jail where especially distinguished persons could be presented to the visitors. Much was made of this presenting: it was amusing, of a given Thursday, to feature a scabby, dehydrated bishop or a professor now clearly insane. It was so satisfying to gather in a ring around some humiliated officer or artist or journalist, to have them in your power, to put them through their paces.

At one point, Neuhauser tells how block leaders would parade captured officers before an assembly, the captured men forced to wear nothing but a cap and a sword-belt. They would force these prisoners to run back and forth in front of the assembly while the SS men whistled and hooted.

Finally, a sermon on this theme ought to reap some of the fine material in Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Comedy, Tragedy, and Fairy Tale*:<sup>5</sup>

As for the king of the kingdom himself, whoever could recognize him? He has no form or comeliness. His clothes are what he picked up at a rummage sale. He hasn't shaved for weeks. He smells of mortality. We have romanticized his raggedness so long that we can only catch echoes of the way it must have scandalized his time in the horrified question of John the Baptist's disciples: "Are you he who is to come?" or in Pilate's question, "Are you the king of the Jews?" You with pants that don't fit and a split lip?

How do we relate to a mocked God? This is a God who, as Buechner elsewhere puts it, looks less like a king than a street accident. We like to think of the suffering Christ as a great tragic figure – sorrow and love flowing mingled down. We like to dwell on his brooding lonesomeness, his sadness and courage and deeply mysterious sense of alienation. But can we absorb the portrait of Christ made to

look foolish? Can the incarnate Son of God be made to look absurd?

Here surely is one of the most awesome portraits of the gospel, the Lord of life willing to look like a fool to save us.

### *The Hands of God*

Still another picture of the passion of Christ centers on hands, especially the hands of God. In Luke's account of the crucifixion (23:46), at the end Jesus "called out with a loud voice, 'Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit.' When he had said this, he breathed his last."

"Father, into your hands." Let's think about those hands of God. The prayer itself was old when Jesus uttered it. It comes from Psalm 31 and some scholars believe that it had become a children's prayer, a prayer children prayed before they went to sleep. Possibly Jesus knew it from his boyhood in the home of Mary and Joseph. Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. "Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit." It's a prayer a weary child could say in utter trust and surrender. God's hands are a safe. You place yourself for safekeeping into the hands of God. You put yourself on deposit with God. As we commit people to the ground, dust to dust, ashes to ashes, and commit a person herself to the living God, so the dying Jesus ministers at his own committal service, offering his life, his very self into the hands of God. He is asking for safe lodging.

All this is done out of darkness. It is a time when all the lights go out for humanity: as Luke says, the sun stopped shining. The light of the world flickers and goes out. Out of the darkness that reigns from noon till three, the child of God seeks the hands of his Father. Surely the best-loved of all graveside prayers stems in part from the unfathomable depths of this event:

O Lord: support us all the day long, until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then, in your mercy,

<sup>5</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Comedy, Tragedy, and Fairy Tale* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 90.

grant us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Douglas Nelson once pointed out that the dying hands prayer of Jesus became a reverent Christian tradition. Luther, Knox, Hus, Polycarp, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Melancthon are all said to have followed Jesus in this way. They prayed themselves into the hands of God or of God's Son. Hus, the famous Czech pre-Reformer, was burned to death in 1415. Seven bishops removed his priestly dress piece by piece, and then placed on his head a paper crown, painted with demons. They said, "We deliver your soul to Satan." "But I," said the trembling Hus, "I commit my Spirit into thy hands, O Lord Jesus Christ who has redeemed me."

One homiletic point of interest here is the whole OT tradition of referring to God as Savior by the use of hands imagery. Indeed, some of the big, standard "historical recital" passages in the Old Testament contain a number of striking parables to Luke's account of the crucifixion. There is the same crying out to God, there are mentions of darkness, and of signs and wonders. And, then, there are those hands. For example, Deuteronomy 26:5-9:

The Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, putting us to hard labor. Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice . . . So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders.

Or, take Joshua 24:2-13:

When I brought your Fathers out of Egypt, you come to the sea, and the Egyptians pursued them. But they cried to the Lord for help and he put darkness between you and the Egyptians.

Psalms 136, Jeremiah 32, and other places do this same recital with the explicit mention of "a mighty hand and an outstretched arm."

Now look at Jesus the Savior. John's Gospel, in particular, continues the tradition of thinking of hands as the instruments of

power. God the Father entrusts his saving work and Word into the hands of the Son (3:35; 13:3). And the Son uses those hands to touch the eyes of the blind. Those hands take a little girl by the hand and raise her up. With those hands lepers are touched and little children are blessed.

Then, in Luke's account the hand of God's power, the Messiah hand breaks bread and pours out a cup. "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table!"

The hand of God's power and blessing and healing – that hand is on the table and next to it a hand that has been squeezing a knot of silver coins in a secret pocket.

Then note that Matthew twice uses the hands locution to express treachery. Matthew 17:22:

When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, 'The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him.

Matthew 26:45, Jesus in the Garden comes to the sleeping disciples, and he says, "Look, the hour is near and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners."

Into the hands of Judas, or into the hands of God. To fall into the wrong hands means you are at their mercy; to entrust yourself into the hands of God means you are at his mercy. Everything depends on whose hands they are.

I would imagine a sermon on those hands of God as doing a lot with the representative character of our own hands – they can embrace or assault, caress or choke, insult with sign language or beckon in welcome. Try to find a copy of the story behind Albrecht Durer's masterpiece, "Praying Hands."

And then reflect on the fact that God's power on earth, the hands of Jesus Christ, the mighty hand and outstretched arm of the New Testament – the wrists of those hands are finally pinned down so God's work can't be done. How does a Savior save anybody when his hands are nailed to a cross? He did

save others, the bystanders admit, but how does the mighty hand save when it's nailed?

And I would imagine the sermon musing about those hands of God the Father into which Jesus commits himself. Does he dare? C. S. Lewis muses after the death of his wife,

Joy Davidson: "Do I dare commit her into the hands of God? After all, I know what those hands did to her while she was still alive."

Father, into your hands.

The steadfast face, bent knee, sacred, wounded head, and open hands – four images of the passion of Christ. All worth considering as images for preaching in Lent.