Homiletical Helps on LW Series B
—Gospels

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
The Presentation of Our Lord
Luke 2:22-40
February 2, 2003

Textual comments: Through the proclamation of the Gospel narrative for The Presentation of Our Lord the hearers should encounter the very presence of God in Christ for them and in them. The narrative functions to embrace the hearers in the reality that in Christ God dwells in His temple, manifesting His presence and meeting the true and faithful Israelite, the one who trusts the Lord God and His promises.

In order to develop this reality, the narrative in Luke's Gospel structurally and thematically parallels the presentation of Samuel by his parents, Hannah and Elkanah, to the priest Eli in the house of the Lord at Shiloh in 1 Samuel 1:21-28. But that primary parallel embraces a number of other Biblical realities. As pious and faithful Israelites, Mary and Joseph come to the temple in Jerusalem in order to fulfill the law of the Lord regarding Mary's purification and the consecration of their firstborn son. They fulfill the Torah in offering the sacrifice of a pair of turtledoves or pigeons, the offering of those of humble means (see Luke 1:48). Although the claim cannot be made that purification (καθαρισμοῦ) means baptism in this text, the homiletical application is in no way problematic. Mary's purification according to the Law (Lev. 12:2-8) points toward the moral purification that comes through baptism into her Son (John 3:25; Eph. 5:26; 2 Pet. 1:9), which is the Lord's doing of the very death of Christ (Heb. 1:3) to us.

The consecration of the firstborn in Exodus 13:1-2 (see also Ex. 13:11-16; 22:29b-30; Lev. 27:26-27; Num. 3:13, 8:17-18) was intended to convey that all life belongs to the Lord God. The sparing of the Israelites and their firstborn sons came at a price: the slaughter of all the firstborn of Egypt. The Lord God saved and redeemed Israel, not because Israel was somehow worthy of such redemption, but because God had chosen Israel as His own. The response to God's grace was to dedicate your redeemed, firstborn son back to God with thanksgiving and praise. Typically the child was consecrated to the Lord and then redeemed from the Lord by the payment of five sanctuary shekels (Num. 3:47-48; 18:15-16). But Luke never mentions the redemption price. This omission would appear to be intentional, indicating to the reader that no redemption was required of Jesus because as the Son of God He belonged to and was permanently (and eternally) consecrated in service to the Lord.

Thus, the narrative's focus on the purification of Mary and the presentation of Jesus is intended not only to point out their obedience, but also to highlight the uniqueness of this firstborn son. This Luke achieves by linking the narrative with the presentation of Samuel. The hearers of this story are expected to recall the presentation of Samuel and to understand Jesus' presentation in light of Samuel's. As Samuel was a firstborn son given by God to Hannah, so she entrusted him—her sacrifice of faith and thanksgiving—to the Lord as His son and servant. Likewise,
Mary entrusts her firstborn Son to the Lord as one consecrated—"holy to the Lord." Jesus, like Samuel, is consecrated to the Lord as His true and faithful Son, and presented to the Lord as His faithful Servant who will manifest the presence of the Lord to Israel and to the Gentiles.

The theme of manifestation/presentation alerts the hearer to a primary aspect of the work of God in Christ. The verb (παραστασέως) used for Mary and Joseph's presentation of Jesus is the same verb that Jesus Himself will use in Luke 23:46 to describe, through the words of Psalm 30:6 (an evening prayer of pious Jews), His entrusting of His spirit into the hands of the Father. Since Mary and Joseph's presentation of Jesus was according to the command of God, the presentation itself was the work of the Father. He manifested Himself through and in His Son, who, when His manifesting work through His cross was finished, presented Himself back to the Father. United with His death and resurrection in Baptism the church is presented with Christ to the Father at the end of the ages (Col. 1:22).

Liturgical and homiletical comments: The Presentation of Our Lord, a primary Christological feast in the church calendar, fortuitously develops one of the primary emphases of the season of Epiphany in which it falls: the manifestation of the Incarnate One, the One born to Mary, as the Light of the world. In the temple in Jerusalem, the place in which Israel met Yahweh, the Son of the heavenly Father meets His people as He comes to them in the flesh to do His Father's bidding. (Thus the feast is called in Byzantine Orthodox churches "The Meeting of our Lord." This meeting of God and His people is enacted in the encounter of Simeon with the child Jesus. As the glory (τὸ δόξα) of Yahweh once filled the temple, so the glory of the Father has now entered the temple in the flesh of the Logos, The Word of God.

Yet, the dwelling of the Word of God in His temple, among His people, indicates that the Father is not content to let Himself be known through His Son only to Israel. The final words of Simeon's canticle in praise to the Lord God for the salvation that has been manifested before him indicates that the dwelling of God with Israel in the flesh of the incarnate One is intended not only for Israel's glory, but for the enlightenment of the Gentiles as well. It is for this reason that lamps and candles (including baptismal candles!) have traditionally been employed profusely on this feast day, including the blessing of all the candles for liturgical use during the church year. Preaching on this day ought to move from the Light that was manifested in Simeon's arms within the temple to the meeting that takes place between God in Christ and every baptized child of God: Baptism. There God manifests His name in the water of Christ's death and resurrection, thus creating a temple within the heart of the baptized in which He might dwell. The Light of the world shines through the Holy, Triune Name into the heart of human darkness.

The thrust of any preaching on the Presentation ought to actually lead the hearers to experience through the Word proclaimed that they are and will be presented to the Father as His firstborn children in Christ, the Word of God enfleshed for us. In the words of Ambrose: "If you, too, seek to be delivered from the body [of sin], then come to the temple, come to Jerusalem, and there wait expectantly for the Lord's Anointed. Receive in your arms the Word of God; embrace it with your works, the arms, as it were, of your faith. Then you will be released, and you will not taste death because you have seen Life."

Kent Burreson
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
Mark 11:29-39
February 9, 2003

The day in the life of a pastor is a busy one, usually not knowing regular office hours. Days off, at least for some, are taken or given sporadically and often involve some kind of work. The Gospel recorded by Mark gives us a day-in-the-life picture of the ministry of Jesus, whose Day Planner noted these entries:

SABBATH
A.M. Synagogue/teach (1:21).
   Heal man possessed by an evil spirit (1:23).
P.M. Lunch with James and John at the home of Simon and Andrew (1:29).
   Heal Simon’s mother-in-law.
   Sunset.
   Healing of the sick and demon-possessed (1:32).

SUNDAY
A.M. Still dark—get up to pray. Find isolated place (1:35).
   Continue traveling throughout Galilee/preaching and driving out demons (1:39).

Such a schedule gives us an idea of who Jesus is. His vocation is to proclaim the Good News of God (1:14). It involves not only teaching and preaching but also driving out demons. While side trips can be made concerning Simon, his marriage (1 Cor. 9:5), etc., this Gospel record is about Jesus. When Simon’s mother-in-law is found suffering from a high or severe fever, Jesus heals her completely. The mother-in-law starts serving the meal. All of this happens on a Sabbath—though without the later interference and accusations of the Pharisees.

Good news spreads quickly. Those who would observe the Sabbath by not carrying any burden, now at sunset (and the end of the Sabbath), bring their burdens of the sick and demon-possessed to the one who gives rest to the weary and the burdened, the one who alone is able to heal.

The next day begins early, before sunrise, with prayer in a solitary place. This is a reoccurring pattern in the ministry of Jesus. Simon and the others search for their teacher, hoping He will continue “playing to the crowds.” Jesus, however, is compelled to fulfill His mission of preaching and proclaiming the Good News of God.

Yet what was true back in the days of St. Mark is still true today. For Christ still proclaims the Good News of God through His Word that is proclaimed in pulpit and at the lectern, at the altar and the hospital bed, in church meeting and home visit. Such proclamation is as freeing and healing as the touch of Christ Himself, because that proclamation is the forgiveness of sins won for us by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, whose ministry began in Galilee.

Henry V. Gerike
Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
Mark 1:40-45
February 16, 2003

Liturgical context: Jesus is made manifest in the Epiphany season as the Christ/Messiah through the calling of disciples and, in the recent several weeks of the season, through demonstrations of divine power and compassion.

Textual notes: The pericope begins with verse 40, but it is in the course of the activities in verse 39 that this encounter with a leprous man takes place. It was as Jesus “went [about] preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons in the whole of Galilee” that “there comes (έρχεται, present middle of the deponent verb έρχομαι) to Him one who is leprous, who is calling out to Him and falling on his knees in front of Him and saying to Him, ‘If you are willing, you can make me clean.’” There is more than mere reportage here. The piling up of the participles (παρακαλών, γονυπετών, λέγων) suggests, at least, and may well have been designed by the writer to indicate that the leper’s appearance was an interruption of Jesus’ program. The leper, like Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46ff., makes a scene. And scenes are always inconvenient.

Jesus’ reputation has preceded Him (Mark 1:28, 37). The leper knows He is able to deliver him from his disease; the question that lingers for him is whether Jesus is willing.

There appears to be a parallelism between the activities of the leper and those of Jesus: The man pleads (παρακαλῶν); Jesus has compassion (σπλαγχνισθεις). The man falls on his knees (γονυπετών) before Jesus; He (Jesus) extends (έκτεινας) His hand not to keep the man away, but to touch (ήψατο) him. Heart/emotion and posture communicate the need of the supplicant, and heart/emotion and posture communicate the desire of the One who can meet the unmet need. And in both participants the words they speak confirm the anxiety and the need of the one—“If you will, you can make me clean.”—and the compassion and power of the Other: “I do will; be clean.” And just as the Word had created, so the Word heals: “Immediately the leprosy went out from him, and he was clean.”

Now, it appears, Jesus seeks to avoid a scene. He speaks to the man sternly (έμβριμησάμενος) and dismisses (έξέβαλεν) him abruptly (ευθύς) with the instruction to tell no one anything, but to show himself to the priest and present the offering that Moses commanded for a cleansed person, as a witness to them, that is, to the no ones he is not otherwise to tell. (The directions (torah) for a leprous person are recorded in Leviticus 13 and 14, with the specifications for purification in 14:1-32. Perhaps one thing that needs to be clarified is that purification occurs in response to and as testimony of healing. Some English translations make it appear as if the procedure of Leviticus 14 is for a cleansing that produces healing. But the examination by the priest and the offerings directed for the first day and the eighth day confirm that healing has taken place and is not simply a temporary remission.)

Instead, the man goes out and tells everything to everybody! The result is that Jesus can no longer go about openly (φανερῶς) in the cities of Galilee; moreover, people flock to Him even in desert (remote, isolated) places (έρημοι).

Theological and homiletical ruminations: The series of episodes from Mark 1:21-2:12 begin and end at Capernaum. Sin is not an explicit factor until Mark 2:1-12, the healing of the paralytic; but the physical and spiritual needs in each of these episodes can be understood as consequences of the fallout of sin. That is, sin’s corruption of creation’s original goodness (Gen. 1:31) constitutes the
opportunity for human susceptibility to the demonic and to illnesses minor and major. Sin is at the root of all human affliction. Sinners, like lepers, are unclean. We need to be cleansed; we need to be forgiven. The mercy of God is manifest in Jesus, the Christ, who shows the Father's compassion, who does not shun the unclean but touches them, and whose word performs what is uttered.

Epiphany is about the manifestation of the presence of God in the person of His Son; it is about the manifestation of the kingdom of God, the reign of heaven. However, it is also a “green” season, a mini-season of the church; and, as such, what the church has received from her Lord, she gives; what she sees her Master do, and how He does it, she also undertakes.

_Suggested outline:

The Testimony of Mercy Is Mercy

I. Jesus manifests the power of the kingdom/Gospel in mercy.
   A. He responds to the need of human hearts with compassion.
   B. He does not shun the unclean but reaches out and touches them.
   C. He heals and cleanses and forgives with His word.

II. As we have received mercy, we now also show mercy.
   A. We respond to the needs of human hearts with compassion.
   B. We do not shun the unclean but reach out and touch them.
   C. We care and comfort in physical and emotional needs.
   D. We announce the Word that forgives to bring healing and cleansing to people tormented by sin.

William Carr

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany
Mark 2:1-12
February 23, 2003

_Notes on the text:_ Capernaum, a town swathed in balmy breezes from the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, is home for Jesus of Nazareth. He returned to the house of Peter and Andrew from a busy tour of preaching alternately in the towns and in “the wilderness” areas of Galilee. Both in the synagogues and in open air settings, He preached the Gospel of God with authority, with great power! For where He preached, He also cast out demons and healed the sick—afflicted with fever, leprosy, and various diseases (Mark 1:22, 31, 34). The response was overwhelming. St. Mark records, “...and people came to Him from every quarter” (Mark 1:45b). Truly, the kingdom of God was at hand!

So Jesus had returned to Capernaum. He was at home a short time when the crowds caught up with Him. So many crowded into the house where He was, that no longer was there room. More came, and they clustered outside, pushing and shoving, blocking the door (Mark 2:1-2). Then came a party of four men, bearing on a crude pallet a man who could not walk, presumably crippled or paralyzed. The crowd blocking the door did not notice. Or, they may have ignored the bearers of this handicapped man. Not to be denied by the crowd at the entry, they hoisted the pallet to the roof, parted the thatch and timbers, and let the paralytic down in the midst, directly where Jesus was speaking the Gospel of God (vv. 3-4). Jesus responded. As if to underscore that the Gospel is for others too, our Lord turned
immediately to the paralytic. His preaching interrupted, an awkward moment, He said, “Son, your sins are forgiven!” (v. 5a). Spontaneous compassion is the only true compassion. God’s forgiveness of sins, unconditional and free, is emphasized by the pretoric aorist, “Your sins are forgiven at this very moment!”

There is the closest link between spiritual healing and making the body whole, both miracles of Jesus. The forgiveness of sins, removing all guilt and fear and doubt regarding our relationship with God, is one gift. The other is wellness in the body. Together, they comprise that wholeness of life which Jesus came to give freely during His earthly ministry (John 10:10). However, the scribes who found a place in that crowded house adhered to the notion that God alone could forgive sins. On that count they challenged Jesus. Their rebuke was non-verbal, hidden, as they mused within their hearts that this absolution from Jesus’ lips was blasphemy (Mark 2:6-7), an accusation they brought against our Lord in those infamous trials leading to His unjust condemnation and crucifixion. Thus, early in our Lord’s ministry, this scene in Capernaum is a beginning which leads to those later events when Jesus died to effect the very forgiveness of sins He speaks to a paralytic who knew that his soul was as warped by sin as his crippled limbs were twisted by paralysis.

The words (vv. 5b to 10) are regarded by some as an interpolation in a healing narrative, in which verse 11 supposedly followed verse 5. Eloquent in his reply, William L. Lane exposes the lack of support for such a radical expedient, advanced most likely because of the construction in verses 10 and 11. The question is whether the declaration of pardon uttered by Jesus is true and effective. Lane answers, “The fact of pardon is announced in verse 5, questioned in verses 6-9, validated by the healing in verse 11, and recognized by the crowd in verse 12. This homogeneous development demonstrates the literary unity of the pericope” (William L. Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 97). Furthermore, this healing miracle is in line with all the great works of God to rescue and redeem His people. And the forgiveness of sins spoken by Jesus is in continuity with God’s gracious dealings, removing sin, that He might bind to Himself a holy people unto the Lord.

These happenings in Capernaum culminated when the paralytic arose from his pallet and stood by our Lord’s power. With very unparalyzed legs, the man walked out of that crowded room, through the door, and into the streets carrying under arm the slats of a pallet he would no longer need, except to get a few hours rest in the night. “All were amazed,” reports Mark, i.e., they were swept off their feet, so to speak (v. 12). They exclaimed, “We never saw anything like this!” Matthew reports that the crowds were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority [and/or power] to men (Matt. 9:8). Luke reports that amazement seized them all, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, “We have seen strange things today!” (Luke 5:26). And the preaching on this pericope today should move hearers toward the same amazement, awe, and ascription of glory to God. Such praise will be spontaneous because God’s own glory is seen today in this Gospel miracle as it was surely seen at Capernaum in the face of Christ Jesus (cf. 2 Cor. 4:6).

Suggested outline:

“Our All-Sufficient Savior”

Introduction: ABC television featured an Easter special in the year 2000. They called it, “The Miracle Maker,” a claymation movie about the life and ministry of Jesus. The production appeared to be an honest effort to present Jesus of the Four Gospels. Yet, the animated clay figurines, though magically convincing, left the
serious viewer to question whether or not the producers wanted Jesus to be genuine, real, a Jesus who is believable today. If that question lingers, consider how these verses, Mark 2:1-12, portray the real Jesus as our all-sufficient Savior.

I. A great need.
   A. Helpless and hopeless is the paralytic (v. 3b).
      They came by droves because Jesus was for real in that region of Galilee. Everywhere He went, the crowds gathered and followed, hoping to satisfy curiosity. Then there is the "nothing can be done for you" crowd, those like a man at Capernaum who was hopelessly disabled. Certainly, they, as well as the "seekers," one kind or another, should come to Jesus. Indeed, why don't we bring them?
   B. Burden shared, burden beared by believing hearts (v. 3).
      This poor man in Capernaum came because he was brought. Here we see more than "a friend in need." Four friends with "faith," bring the paralytic to Jesus (cf. v. 5a). The man was too ill to carry himself on two feet. Perhaps he was paralyzed, or afflicted with a palsy, or crippled. Friends carry him a distance. More than their effort, having faith, they brought the paralytic! The best friends of the helpless have faith that Jesus is the best friend of those with needs beyond the help of human resources (v. 5a).
   C. Directing the need to Jesus.
      Faith drives the little group to Jesus, faith stirred within their hearts by the overhearing of our Lord's preaching and reports of His mighty works (cf. Mark 1:14-15, 23-27, 29-31, 32-34, 38-39, 40-45): Prayers for the sick are an act of faith, taking these ill persons to Jesus that in Him they might have hope and be healed. Pray earnestly, even as the men in the Gospel text were tenacious, unstoppable, hoisting the pallet up on the rooftop, and letting down the paralytic in front of Jesus (v. 4).

II. A great Savior.
   A. Interruption, or not an interruption?
      Was Jesus interrupted by the sudden unexpected descent of the paralytic from the roof? Perhaps it was not an interruption at all. Is there not continuity between His speaking the Word of the Gospel and His powerful Gospel action with compassion and mercy upon the helpless (v. 5)?
   B. He knows the heart.
      His first word, "Son, your sins are forgiven!," on the surface, is surprising, except that He both knows the heart's deep need, and He speaks to that need as none other can (v. 5). Scholars report the universal belief in first-century Judaism that sickness was the result of sin. The remote cause of all frailties since the Fall is sin. But care must be exercised, lest all illness be attributed to sin as an immediate first cause, which is not always the case (cf. 2 Cor. 12:7-10). Then, in the light of His "first" word, speaking the forgiveness of sins, what does Jesus know about our hearts? Know thyself! No, "Know thyself as God knows thyself!" Be not afraid of His knowledge! Confess sins to Him who is eager to say, "Son, daughter, your sins are forgiven!"
   C. He speaks His word, and forgiveness is, just as He said.
      Only God can forgive sins, mused the skeptical scribes, eager to hang
an indictment of blasphemy on Jesus (v. 6). Unwittingly, they made a good point which they never intended to make. If there is forgiveness of sins here, then God is right here, in the midst of His people, as Isaiah reports: “I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake, and I will not remember your sins” (Is. 43:25; cf. Is. 61:1). And, in the presence of these scribes, a poor sinner is liberated from slavery to sin (John 8:34); and a crippled man is free from paralysis, for Jesus speaks again to the paralytic: “Arise, take up your pallet, and go home!” (v. 11).

III. A grand result.

A. Homecoming.

He is now a man, whole in body and in soul. He goes home, not as he came with a burden of sin and guilt, not as he came with palsy or paralysis. What do you take home when the Lord by His servant, your pastor, speaks, “I forgive you all your sins!” when you take the Lord’s body and blood and receive the remission of sins? We dare say, you go home with more, much more, than you realized heretofore. As you watch this man whom Jesus healed, hurrying out the door and into the streets of Capernaum, you see and believe Jesus Christ! And you are the more conscious of your Lord.

B. To unending amazement.

Swept off their feet, so to speak, the crowds who witnessed these happenings in that Capernaum house, said, “We never saw anything like this! We have seen strange things today!” (Mark 2:12; Luke 5:26). Not only “what” they saw but “who” they saw is the point! They saw none other than our God and Savior in Christ, sufficient for any and every ill of the body, sufficient to forgive any and all sins. To Him be the glory!

Conclusion: Capernaum is a delightful village on the seashore. And who did you see in Capernaum today? Yes, “The Miracle Maker,” Jesus Christ, genuine, for real, our Savior sufficient for every need. Amen.

Richard H. Warneck

The Transfiguration of Our Lord
Last Sunday after the Epiphany
Mark 9:2-9
March 2, 2003

“The Transfiguration of Our Lord” is a favorite hymn of Christians. It was played by musicians on the decks of the Titanic as the great ocean liner was sinking in the North Atlantic, carrying more than a thousand passengers and crew to a watery grave. At times when life is either fragile or threatened unexpectedly, the desire to be close to God is undeniable.

This is why three disciples, Peter and James and John, must be the envy of many. How close they were to God! And it happened this way. The Lord took these disciples up onto a mountain, one of the slopes of Mt. Hermon. St. Luke states that He went there to pray (Luke 9:28-36). The disciples looked on, or they prayed with our Lord. And suddenly His countenance was altered, and His garments became glistening, dazzling white. Then, two of the ancients, Moses and Elijah, appeared, and they conversed with our Lord.

Alternating between excitement and fright the disciples did not know what to
do. Peter blurted out, “Master, it is well to be here. Let us make three tents, one for You and one for Moses and one for Elijah” (Mark 9:5). About then, a cloud enveloped them and a voice from the cloud affirmed Jesus as the beloved Son of God and issued this command, “Listen to Him!” (Mark 9:7). Then suddenly, this hallowed moment on the mount was ended. It was over. Looking about, the disciples saw no one except Jesus (Mark 9:8).

Suggested outline:

“Help From Above”

I. Help to rise above the day.

Nearness to God? This event, three disciples with Jesus on the mount, is about God’s nearness to us. And that helps notably to lift our spirits above the present fallen age and our self-inflicted disappointments. Our Lord’s glory unveiled touches humankind with the divine so that we may lift up our hearts. From this chaotic world, its terror and bombings and killings, also evil in high places—greed, graft, corruption—from the spiritual darkness, like perpetual night around the clock, we may look up and see the brightness of the glory of the Lord and draw near and take refuge with Him.

More than just a look, we want to scurry up into the heights of that mountain. Are we running away? Our petty faults, perennial failures, and habitual sins are reason to be up and away in those heights, seeking Him who is the “light and the life” of the human race (John 1:4). Escape we would, and hearts and minds fleeing to our Lord, this we may do. In touch with His glory, we are helped to lift our heads high above this tarnished age and our own tattered lives.

II. Help to comprehend the cross.

In another way, this glimpse of our Lord’s glory on the mount is helpful. Perhaps you share the quiet suspicion that numbers of Christians have grown complacent about the exciting news of the Gospel. But the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a power to challenge such complacency! It can happen this way. In a nearby community, a local pastor was taken into custody, suspected of child abuse. The church hosts a school for small children. When the TV anchor reported this sad incident, the camera caught the sign on the church lawn which reads, “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son!”

Little did the media sense how their nettling irony commended to the viewers the very power of the Gospel. A world gone berserk, a world where even trusted spiritual leaders betray such sacred trust and descend into the pits of disgrace and shame, this very world God so loved that He sent His Son, even to death on a cross, so that love divine might flow freely with forgiveness of sins and life and salvation for all of this world’s people.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is still exciting, even earthshaking, when you consider that this very Gospel was the subject of conversation between our Lord and the ancients, Moses and Elijah, in the heights of the mountain. What did they talk about? No secret. St. Luke states that they conversed about our Lord’s exit, His decease (Luke 9:31). The redeeming death of the Savior, His life-blood as power to cleanse us from our sins, this Gospel was the conversation on the mount of the Lord’s Transfiguration. The Lord’s suffering and His decease for us, what we are about to remember anew in Lent a few days from now, help us to be thankful and also excited that we may believe in our Lord, true God
and true man, who redeemed us, not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death. This is as extraordinary as it is exciting. And we cannot any longer be complacent about the cross!

This Gospel and the glory that day on the Mount stirred Peter to capture the excitement, to enshrine and preserve that celestial conversation and the glory of the moment. But just as quickly, his plan to build three tents for Jesus and Moses and Elijah was preempted by a cloud and a voice from the cloud speaking of Jesus, “This is My beloved Son...listen to Him!” (Mark 9:5). Listen, and then follow Him. To remain spectators of glory will not do when, in earshot, a world caught in the web of sin and evil cries out for something as good and exciting as the Gospel of Christ, which we may bring to them, keeping in our hearts the seeing of the Lord in glory. But we descend from those heights to the plain below, to the city streets and to the country roads, in order that we may help others to lift up their hearts and see Jesus and confess His saving name.

III. Help to anticipate glory with Christ.

And the glory of our Lord unveiled in the mountain helps us in yet another way. That glory communicates a message about Him from where He has come and where He has gone and where we are going to share His eternity when His glory shall be realized in us, in all the saints (2 Thess. 1:10). Things eternal were easy subjects for Jesus. They came naturally. Earlier, Peter acknowledged that our Lord had the words of eternal life (John 6:68). Jesus could speak about heaven as a home for Himself and us together. He had a clear vision of everything glorious which we see only unclearly, as through a clouded glass dimly, as St. Paul put it (1 Cor. 13:12). The face of God unveiled, the fountains of wisdom opened, the answers to unanswered questions this side of heaven, and many other things unnamed as they are yet unknown were all in the grasp of our Lord. The glimpse of His glory seen in the mount, the vision of this Lord who was there, but is now with us, and will be there for us in the forever future is a blessed hope that helps us through whatever days we face for a little time yet on earth’s calendar. For here we have no continuing city, but having been with Jesus on the mount, we seek one that surely is to come (cf. Heb. 13:14)! His glory helps us to hope and, meanwhile, also to pray: Lord Jesus,

Draw us to you;
Our hope renew;
Into Your kingdom take us.
Let us all there
Your glory share;
Your saints and
Joint heirs make us.
Amen.

Richard H. Warneck
First Sunday in Lent  
Mark 1:12-15  
March 9, 2003

Preliminary comments: Mark's account of the temptation is brief and provides a summary of what occurred. Yet, Mark's account contains details that Matthew's (4:1-11) and Luke's (4:1-13) do not. All should be studied as a part of sermon preparation.

It is immediately following Jesus' baptism that the Spirit leads ("drives him out" - ἐκβάλλει) into the wilderness. One senses determination and purpose in this action and its "immediate" (εὐθύς) connection to Christ's baptism. Mark uses this same verb (ἐκβάλλω) eleven times to describe the expulsion of demons and to describe Jesus' action in driving the money changers out of the temple grounds (9:15). It is also used to describe the expulsion of the heir from the vineyard (12:8) in the parable of the wicked tenants. Combined with the use of the historic use of the present, it denotes a strong, forceful, intended act. As such, it denotes God's will that this testing occur at this time, at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry and immediately following His baptism.

It is here that Jesus stays and endures Satan's temptation during these forty days. There is no reason to assume that the three temptations listed in Matthew and Luke are the only ones which Jesus encountered during these forty days. There has been much written concerning the "forty days" and possible connections to Moses (Ex. 34:28) and Elijah (1 Kings 19:8). Some also point to a first Adam/second Adam comparison suggested by the "wild beasts" mentioned by Mark. Angels attending Christ are also compared to the angels who attended the Israelites in the wilderness (Ex. 23:20, 23; 32:34). These are interesting comparisons, but they are not the main point of the text.

This temptation at the hands of Satan (a "battle" in the thematic approach taken below) was just one skirmish in a fierce war. Other salvos fired by Satan in an attempt to prevent Jesus from going to the cross include: (1) Peter's rebuke of Jesus following Christ's prediction of His passion (Mark 8:31-33, next week's Gospel lesson); (2) the people wanting to make Jesus a king (earthly) following His miraculous feeding of the 5,000 (John 6:14-15); and (3) the mocking of the crowds as Jesus hung from the cross (Matt. 27:41-43). All are examples of the continued "testing" of Jesus by Satan. Luke appropriately describes the ongoing nature of these tests when he writes following the ordeal that the devil "left him until an opportune time" (4:13).

Yet, the ultimate victory was promised by God (Gen. 3:15) after the "first Adam" succumbed to the temptation of Satan. It was God's plan and purpose (Gal. 4:4-5) to provide redemption for those under the Law through Jesus Christ. So, Christ can proclaim, "The time has come... The kingdom of God is near" (v. 15).

Goal: God provides assurance and strength in demonstrating Christ to be the faithful Son of God who emerges victorious over Satan's temptation.

Malady: The "old Adam" and the sinful world are utilized by Satan and can bring us to despair as we succumb to sin and become discouraged (cf. Paul's despair in Rom. 7).

Means: "Tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin," Christ went on to win the ultimate war with Satan by His perfect sacrifice on the cross. By grace, through faith in Jesus Christ, His victory is our victory!
Sermon outline:

“Winning the Battle and the War”

Introduction: Each of the supervisors in a relatively small company were invited to apply for a director’s position that was open. Each did so, but one of the employees began the practice of coming in early, working late, and making sure that he was seen by all of the supervisory personnel as he did so. He began sending memos to upper management with his ideas for cost-saving measures and ways productivity could be increased. His memos even drew attention to wasteful practices in other departments—something his colleagues did not appreciate. He was selected for the director’s position, but now he was the director of a group of people who were angry with him and felt as though he was selected for the position at their expense. You could say that he “won the battle, but lost the war.”

In today’s text, as Jesus is tempted by Satan, we will see how Jesus “wins the battle and the war.”

I. The battle
   A. Was intense.
      1. “Command these stones....”
      2. “Throw yourself down....”
      3. “All this I will give you...bow down and worship me.”
   B. Had “high stakes.”
   C. Was entered intentionally.
   D. Was Satan’s attempt to nullify Jesus’ mission.
   E. Was won by Jesus.

II. The war
   A. Was entered willingly by Jesus.
   B. Included other battles for Jesus.
   C. Was won by Jesus on the cross.
      2. 1 John 3:8.

III. Our battles
   A. Will be intense.
      1. Our adversary.
      2. Our conditions (old Adam, world).
   B. Will include lost battles.
   C. Will be accompanied by repentance (Lenten application).

IV. Our war
   A. Was fought for us by Christ.
   B. Was won on the cross.

Conclusion: Although life is filled with opportunities to “win the battle and lose the war,” we can rest assured that we have a Savior who won both. Not only was He victorious in the battle we observed today, but He defeated sin, death, and Satan once and for all on the cross. Through Baptism, His victory is our victory.... As Paul declares, we are “more than conquerors through Him who loved us.”

Glen Thomas
Second Sunday in Lent  
Mark 8:31-38  
March 16, 2003

**Preliminary comments:** Peter's exemplary confession of faith (8:29) is followed immediately by a demonstrated lack of understanding concerning Christ's mission. Christ describes His rejection, suffering, and crucifixion and is immediately rebuked by Peter. The stern words of Jesus, “Get behind me Satan!” (v. 33) are followed by instruction concerning the appropriate outlook (attitude) for the disciple who is “following Jesus.”

Once again, the kingdom of God stands in sharp contrast to the kingdom of this world. Peter, and the other disciples at other times, demonstrated an attitude that was characterized by anything but self-sacrifice, self-denial, and humility. Jesus' previous talk about rejection, suffering, and death was not congruent with Peter's understanding of Christ's mission, and, by extension, his role as a follower of Jesus.

The disciples argued on more than one occasion about who among them would be the greatest (cf. Luke 22:24). After Jesus indicated how hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, Peter reminds Jesus of just how much the disciples have left behind to follow Him and asks, “What will there be for us?” (Luke 19:27). The mother of James and John asked for special places of honor for her sons (Matt. 20:20-22). Judas stole from the treasury (John 12:6). And Peter fulfilled Jesus' prediction in denying Him three times in the courtyard rather than face personal danger (Matt. 26:69-75). The antiphon repeated time and time again is one of personal gain, personal concern, and personal importance. Such is the way of sin.

The preacher will want to be cautious not to preach the description of the Christian disciple as a “new law” which must be met in order to please God. Jesus is describing the life of His disciple. The ability to do this in a God-pleasing way can only follow God's work of regeneration in a person. If one understands the “deny himself” to be repentance and the “follow me” to be a call to faith and trust in Jesus Christ, then one could understand this as a call to faith. This understanding is also supported by the fact that it was not only the disciples who were hearing these words but also “the multitudes” (v. 34). Suffice it to say that the preacher needs to be aware of the danger noted above in making application of the text for his hearers. A tragic misunderstanding can be formed by the hearers if the text is preached in such a way as to describe attitudes that man is to generate on his own.

Another “Gospel application” will be the preaching of forgiveness for the multitude of times that we in thought, word, and deed fail to exemplify these qualities in our lives. We indulge self, reject our cross, and follow our own sinful desires. The very mention of these qualities can bring about guilt and anxiety in God's people as they consider how many times they fail to exhibit them on a daily basis.

Jesus describes one who is following Him as one who will:

*Deny himself* (ἀπαρνησάσθω εαυτόν) — to deny utterly; disown. It is the verb used in Isaiah 31:7 in the LXX (For in that day every one of you will reject the idols of silver and gold your sinful hands have made [NIV]). In this sense, the follower of Christ disowns and denies self. Ironically, this is the same type of denial of Jesus that Peter exercised in the courtyard following Jesus' arrest (cf. Matt. 26:75—same verb!). It is a complete and total denial of self that Jesus describes, not a mere changing of a few tendencies or habits.
Take up his cross—the σταυρός was an instrument of death, and the phrase “take up his cross” refers to hardships and even death suffered as a result of being a follower of Jesus. While many today use the phrase “bearing a cross” to refer to everything from illnesses to layoffs, the phrase is properly used to refer only to suffering which occurs as a direct result of the Christian faith. Jesus will “pick up His cross,” literally, and drag it through the streets of Jerusalem until He could not bear up under its weight. Tradition has it that all but the disciple John would die as a direct result of their faith in Christ (cf. Jesus’ prediction of this in Matt. 20:22-23). There is also the related “crucifying of the flesh” (see Gal. 5:24) that is done in the Christian life, certainly related to “denying self” mentioned previously. As Jesus marches carrying His cross to Calvary, we join in procession, each carrying our cross as we “follow Him” (see below).

Follow me (άκολουθείτω μοι)—note that the tense changes to the present. This is the positive action which follows the “good-bye” to self. He fills the resultant void. It is a journey which Christ invites us to travel with Him. It is a journey to the cross and beyond (cf. LW 386).

Goal: To describe the attitude of the disciple of Jesus exemplified by self-sacrifice and selfless devotion to Christ.

Malady: Our sinful nature engenders pride, self-service, self-gratification.

Means: Jesus denied Himself, took up His cross, and upon that cross laid down His life for the sins of the world.

Sermon outline:

“It’s All about Him”

Introduction: My wife recently received a card from a local business wishing her a happy birthday and inviting her to come into the business during the month and receive a “15% birthday discount” on their products and services. The card ended with the phrase, “After all, it’s all about you!”

I. It’s all about you
   A. Is the way of sin.
      1. Adam and Eve.
      2. Cain and Abel.
      3. David and Bathsheba.
   B. Was evident in the disciples.
      5. Avoiding danger (Matt. 26:69-75).
   C. Is evident in our lives.
      1. Thoughts.
      2. Words.
      3. Deeds.

II. It’s all about Him.
   A. God’s attitude: It’s all about us.
      1. He wants none to perish.
      2. He sent His Son.
B. Jesus' attitude: It's all about us.
   1. He came not to be served, but to serve (Matt. 20:28).
   2. He humbled Himself and was obedient unto death (Phil. 2:5-11).

C. Our new attitude: It's all about Him.
   1. Living for Him (2 Cor. 5:15).
   2. Denying self (see above).
   3. Carrying (taking up) our cross (see above).
   4. Following Him (see above).

Conclusion: As Christians living in this world, we are always going to be tempted to adopt the “It’s all about me” attitude. From postcards arriving in the mail, to commercials on television, to the actions of others as we are driving to work in the morning it is easy to get caught up in an “It’s all about me” outlook.

Yet, Christ invites us to adopt a new and different attitude as His followers.

Glen Thomas

Third Sunday in Lent
John 2:13-22
March 23, 2003

We do not often picture Jesus the way that our text today pictures Him, whip in hand, overturning tables, driving people and animals helter-skelter from the temple. What He is doing is cleaning house. More than just spring house-cleaning, though, He is also claiming His Father's house, indeed pointing us beyond a house to Himself.

The occasion is the Passover, ordinarily observed in a home, but also an occasion for pilgrimage to Jerusalem. As always, but more so, there were crowds of people coming to the temple to offer worship.

The problem, therefore, is not the Passover, but the temple, and the infrastructure that had developed to support the worship there. In the Lord's very direct words, it had become a “marketplace” (emporium, ἐμπόριον).

What the marketplace was meant to serve was understandable, even defensible. For one thing, money had to be exchanged. Anyone who has been to a foreign country knows that the first thing you do when you get to a foreign country, is look for a bank or a place where you can change your money for theirs. And that was no different in Jesus' day, because on high festival times like the Passover, people were coming from all over that part of the world to Jerusalem. Beyond that simple exchange of money, however, they had to pay their temple tax, but could not use filthy lucre coined by heathen nations; they needed clean lucre (?) from the temple itself. So there had to be money-changers (κολλυβιστής). Does that mean there was abuse, gouging the faithful coming to the temple? Maybe, even likely, though that does not seem to be what triggered our Lord. More likely, I suspect, it was the strange mixture of money and worship there, and whenever there are people making money off the worship of others—and they are the first ones you meet at the temple—you likely end up entering the temple turned off, even resentful. Something is out of synch here—just like the reaction we all feel about appeals for money from radio and television evangelists.

Beyond the changing of money, there were also the animals. Again, we are dealing with something necessary. For one thing, people are coming from around
the world; how are they going to bring their own sacrificial animal, from Egypt or Rome or even from Hebron or Jericho? For another, those animals had to be inspected and certified as unblemished and spotless—that is tougher than USDA inspection. We are talking about a service here. We are also talking about a colossal mess. Can you imagine, especially on a high festival with folks from all over, how many cattle, sheep, or doves that might take? Can you imagine the noise, the mess, the smell? Talk about a marketplace—in the temple itself! Not only are there people making money off the worship of others, not only are there people grumbling about being ripped off at the temple, but there are people coming to worship fighting off the smell and the noise of a barnyard.

We can understand that Jesus cleans house. We need to understand, though, that Jesus was not concerned simply with people making some money off other people or with the fragrance/ambiance of the animals—as though, if they would be a little quieter or a little cleaner or would set up shop outside the temple, it would be okay. Jesus was cleaning house, getting rid of the whole system that presumes that a person must or even can make his/her way into the presence of God with the payment of a tax or the sacrifice of an animal. This is my Father's house, not a place where business is done—not the business of changing money or providing animals for sacrifice, not the business of cashing in on the worship of God, not the business of commercializing our relationship with God. This is my Father's house (οίκος τού πατρός μου), a house of prayer, a place where we meet; not a barnyard or a bank but God Himself, a place where money, of whatever currency and whatever amount, buys nothing: a place where the sacrifice God looks for is the heart, not some USDA-inspected beef or lamb or pigeon.

What Jesus is doing is taking the first step—as the later verses of the text indicate—of looking beyond the temple itself. You want to come into the presence of God? You not only do not need the temple tax or the animals, you do not even need the temple. I will be the temple. I will be the presence of God among you. I will take you to the Father. And the road does not go through the mess or the blood of those animals, no matter how unblemished; it goes through the mess and the blood of the cross, through the death of God's Son Himself.

Talk about cleaning house!

There is still more, though. The house—John does not say it, but the other Gospels do—the house was to be a house of prayer for all nations (οίκος προσευχής πάσιν τοῖς ἑθνεῖς)! In this old house, where do you suppose the nations/Gentiles got to worship? There was a Court of the Gentiles, on the outer edge of the temple—that is as close as Gentiles could get in that temple. Where do you suppose the money changers set up their tables? And the animals got bought and sold? Where do you suppose the noise of haggling and the smell of the animals centered? Right here in the outsiders' court, the Court of the Gentiles/nations. When Jesus cleans house, therefore, He is not just cleaning out a mess; He is making room. He is opening up the house for all nations. He is beginning work on a spiritual temple that does not charge admission, that does not position anyone on the outside, and does not make anyone second-class, but brings life and joy to all.

When Jesus cleans the temple, He opens it for every person in this world. And by the by, He who cleans the temple also cleans the world while He is at it. He removed messes and stinks from every people and every person in this room/world. But once cleaned, there are no more outcasts, no second-class people, no one beyond help and hope.

Be glad it is not just a matter of dealing with money-changers and messy sheep. I mean, if that was all that was at stake, we would likely have to find a place
for them in our churches today. We would likely need to upgrade our sound-proofing, to say nothing of installing some sort of solid-Glade® doorway, right? But when the Lord cleans, He cleans temples and people—and He cleans the way to the Father, for us, forever.

Suggested outline:

More Than Spring Cleaning

I. Jesus cleansed a temple which had become a marketplace, cluttered with...
   A. Temple tax.
   B. Animals for sacrifice.
II. Jesus replaced temple with spiritual temple...
   A. Where the way to God is not eased by money and animals.
   B. Rather, Jesus Himself is the way.
III. Jesus makes that spiritual temple...
   A. A house of prayer...
   B. For all nations.

Henry Rowold

Fourth Sunday in Lent

John 3:14-21
March 30, 2003

This exceedingly rich text offers the hearer more than can be comprehended in one sermon. The themes of relationship to the Old Testament, the predominance of the Gospel in God’s plan, the Father sending the Son, salvation as a present eternal gift, darkness and light, exposure of evil and manifestation of the works of God almost overwhelm the reader. For the pastor, the main challenge is to focus selectively on one or more of the main themes of the passage and to put aside the rest of the material.

Jesus juxtaposes Son of Man (v. 14) with Son of God (v. 16). Son of Man is applied only to Jesus by Jesus in the Gospel of John. By juxtaposing the two concepts Jesus proclaims Himself to be both supreme representative of humankind and also the one sent from the Father in heaven.

Verse 16: The eternal Word seeks to share with humankind His eternal nature. Jesus is the μονογενές, the only begotten from the Father. “Unique” as a translation does not do justice to John 1:14. Jesus is the only one brought forth by the Father from eternity with both a message and an act of salvation.

Verse 18: Notice the present passive of the Greek verb κρίνω. A believer who lives in daily repentance and amendment of life is presently not condemned and will not be condemned eternally. On the day of judgment, that person will stand in the same forgiveness then that he/she has today.

Verse 19: Judgment has already started. The present judgment is seen in the evil acts of those who reject the truth of God’s plan in Jesus. They are already entangled by their evil deeds. Their future condemnation will be the same as today.
Sermon outline:

The Key to the Puzzle

Introduction: She is an intelligent social worker with a thriving counseling practice in a major metropolitan area. She attends the Episcopal church with her husband. When she is in social circles she asks her favorite searching question, "Why is there so much evil in the world?" The question never seems to go away.

I. Life is a puzzle that people rationally try to make sense of.
   A. People often see past the problem of the present and ask what it means. After the sniper shootings in the Washington, D.C., area, people asked, "Can we feel safe again? Will our children grow up feeling protected and secure? What does it mean when two men can terrorize an area?" News analysts and politicians have a field day with the answers.
   B. Nicodemus asked deep questions of life.
      1. Nicodemus was trying to figure out how Jesus fit into God's plan for Israel. It did not always make sense (vv. 2, 4, 9).
      2. As humans we live by what we see. When the pieces of the puzzle do not all fit together, the incongruity of life becomes stressful. At the first anniversary of 9/11 there were secular counselors waiting at telephones at a local television studio to help people cope with stress related to the memory. However, the greater questions of how 9/11 fit into an overall plan for life were left unanswered.
   C. Jesus takes time for a heart-to-heart talk with Nicodemus (v. 2).
   D. Jesus gives heavenly answers to earthly questions.
      1. Jesus is from heaven with the answers (v. 13).
      2. Jesus will be lifted up and will offer eternal life (v. 14).

II. Only God can piece together the incongruities of life and relate them to us (v. 13).
   A. God's love overrides all other plans for the world (v. 16).
      1. He will not let the people of the world simply "perish," be utterly destroyed.
      2. In the midst of violence He comes to save them (v. 17).
      3. He offers eternal life as a present possession beginning today. It cannot be destroyed (v. 18; 10:28).
   B. The created order reveals God's power and majesty but does not offer an overall plan from God (Ps. 19:1-4).
   C. Evil acts of human beings in the name of another god seek to confuse people and to question God's providence as part of His plan (Rom. 1:18, 28-31).

III. God continues to work His plan in this world through those who have faith in Jesus.
   A. Through the deeds of those who come to the Light (v. 21).
   B. Not all come to the Light because they are too intent on evil behavior (v. 19). The true God exposes evil deeds done in the name of another god (Deut. 5:17).
   C. God's overall plan will prevail (v. 16).
   D. God's love is stronger than man's hate (v. 16).

That is the key to the puzzle.  

Gary Schaper
While this event recorded by the evangelist John occurs after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, this pericope is used on this Sunday as a liturgical prelude to the events of Holy Week. Because He raised Lazarus from the dead, Jesus had garnered the attention not only of "many people" (12:18) who had gone "out to meet him," but also of the Pharisees who were complaining and unknowingly prophesying about "how the whole world has gone after him" (12:19). Fulfilling, in part, this "prophecy" are "some Greeks" (probably God-fearers whose faith and sympathy for Judaism fell short of full integration into the Jewish people by the rite of circumcision and acceptance of the requirements of the Law) wanting more than a glimpse of Jesus—they wanted to "see" or interview Him. The arrival of these Greeks (Gentiles), worshiping with Jews during the Passover celebration, cues Jesus' declaration: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (12:23). The "hour," so long delayed (John 2:4; 7:30; 8:20), and the glory to be given meet at the cross of Jesus' death and the empty tomb of His resurrection.

That we no longer hear anything about the Greeks leaves the preacher with two options: perhaps they never got to "see" Jesus (thus becoming the first Gentiles to learn that it is necessary to believe without seeing [20:29]) or that Jesus' entire reply is spoken in their presence, but since John is telling the story of Jesus and not the Greeks, they no longer are mentioned.

How Jesus is to be glorified is explained by His Parable of the Kernel of Wheat. While scientists may disagree with the terminology of a seed dying, yet that is how our Lord speaks of it and the way we understand it (see 1 Cor. 15:36-37). Here Jesus is the seed, who dies, is planted in the earth, is raised and produces "many seeds"—"millions of children of God, fruit in most glorious abundance" (as Lenski puts it on p. 863 of his commentary). Lenski further comments: "In the petition of these Greeks Jesus sees the great harvest that will go on and on as the product of the great Grain of Wheat (Himself) which fell in the earth." The fruit of that great kernel of wheat will follow Him in life and death. Following Jesus means hating life in this world or dying to one's self (Mark 8:34). Following Jesus means serving as He did (John 13:1-17; Mark 10:43-45). While we, as believers and yet sinful humans, will die, we die not as saviors but as ones who are saved.

Jesus was to die. His death would not be like those of His followers, for whom the terrors of death have been removed by cancelled sin and guilt. Jesus' death would, in fact, remove that sin and guilt for all of us. In the face of this coming death on the cross, Jesus was deeply troubled (as in Gethsemane, cf. Matt. 26:37). According to Luke 12:50 Jesus knows He must face the baptism of fire, the final purpose of His mission—to suffer and die in order to give life—must be accomplished and God must be glorified. The perfect obedience of the Son has glorified the Father. Now in the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus the glory of God is revealed. The Greeks have asked to see Jesus, but all those around heard the voice of God. Jesus explains why they heard the voice. "Now" is the time for this glorification of the Son, because "now" is the judgment of the world, "now" is the fall of Satan (Luke 10:18). For in the cross-death of Jesus, Satan falls and Christ is lifted up (Is. 52:13)—drawing all men to Himself (John 6:44)—Jews and Gentiles alike. Lenski (876) says "this is the drawing exerted by grace through the means of grace (Word and Sacrament), alike in effectiveness and seriousness for all men, not in any way limited on God's part."
While the sermon may take several different approaches, one rich vein would be to consider that the Greeks got more than for what they asked. They wanted to see Jesus, they got to hear Him teach. They heard Him say it was time for Him to receive glory—like a seed planted, His own death. They heard the voice of God from heaven for their benefit and for ours. For Christ’s death and resurrection is for our benefit also.

Henry V. Gerike

Palm Sunday
Sunday of the Passion
Mark 14:1-15
April 13, 2003

Christian Actions Speak for Themselves

Some say that actions speak louder than words. Words are not great unless they are put into actions. Christian actions speak for themselves: A pastor or a loved one standing at the bedside of the dying with his hands folded and head bowed; The parishioner placing a money gift into the Sunday offering plate; The hug given to a fellow Christian who has just lost a spouse or child; Watching believers in Christ processing to the communion rail to receive the body and blood of Jesus Christ given and shed for the forgiveness of sins. Christian actions speak for themselves.

Righteous actions speak for themselves.

Suggested outline:

I. Faith embodies our actions. We are in Christ. In Christ we do Christian deeds from faith.

   Only by the power of the Holy Spirit are we enabled to live the life of Christ in the world so that when those around us see us provide a place for the weary traveler, remain at the bed of the dying, and prepare for a death in Christ they see not only our faith that holds to Christ, but also Christ in us.

   A. Simon the leper provides a place for Jesus to rest His weary body (v. 3).
   B. Mary poured expensive perfume onto the head and feet of Jesus to prepare Him for His burial (vv. 3-4; John 12:1-3).
   C. Jesus’ disciples go to prepare the upper room for the Passover meal (vv. 12-15).

II. Self-righteous actions speak for themselves.

   In this pagan world, self is god. The old Adam, the sinful flesh, is very convincing when it says: “Did God really say—that you should look out for others while you are going down ‘the tubes’ of unemployment, poverty, or prolonged illness?” Satan entered Judas’s flesh, and Judas sinned. He violated the First Commandment. If you break one, you break them all (James 2:10). How do you place the things of the world over and above the things of God?

   A. Greed speaks: Judas Iscariot rebukes Mary harshly (vv. 4-5; John 12:4-6).
   B. Judas Iscariot goes to the chief priests to betray Jesus for money.

III. Christian actions speak for themselves.

   Frequently, actions speak louder than words. Words, however, without the
actions to back them up are spoken in emptiness. Hence, a picture is worth a thousand words. Jesus' preparation for His entry into Jerusalem speaks words with actions. This text tells us that Christian actions speak for themselves because of the Christ in you. The picture of Christ rebuking Judas who chastised Mary for using such expensive perfume on Jesus' body. A Christian speaking the truth in love to those who comprise the Gospel of Jesus Christ by their cursing or following New Age teachings. How do your Christian actions speak for themselves in light of your faith that holds to Jesus Christ?

A. Actions of Jesus Christ in His suffering, rejection, death on the Cross of Calvary for the forgiveness of sins (vv. 6-8).

B. Actions of Christians living the life of Christ in the world.

Simon the Leper provided Jesus a place to rest His weary body. Mary said nothing, but her actions bespeak of love for the Lord. The disciples followed the Lord's directions and fulfilled what He commanded. Judas Iscariot took money to betray Jesus, his rabbi and teacher. By the Spirit of God we are baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ so that our actions speak louder than words. Living the life of Christ in the world testifies to the Christ in us and His saving message of salvation by grace.

Robert W. Weise

The Resurrection of Our Lord
Easter Day
John 20:1-9 (10-18)*
April 20, 2003

(* This homiletical help is written for verses 10-18.)

Writing an Easter sermon can be difficult because it comes at the end of the Lenten season and creativity may be waning. It may be helpful to approach the text not only from a theological point of view but also from the perspective of the drama and excitement inherent in the story line.

Mary stayed at the tomb while the disciples dispersed. She was going to take responsibility for the body of Jesus if she could locate it (v. 10). Mary has sorrow, fear, and shock as she stands near the tomb and then recognizes Jesus (v. 15). It must have been an overwhelming experience.

Verse 17: Jesus has His human body. Mary is requested not to hold onto Him, ἀπτόν (present imperative).

Verse 17: Jesus is the eternal Word. He came from the Father, and He is returning to the Father. God is our Father through the redemption completed by Jesus.

Following are two possible sermon outlines. The first one deals with death and grief. The second one deals with the struggle between the forces of evil and the Christ. In this age of terrorism the problem of overt evil is ever present and needs to be subtly addressed from many perspectives.

Suggested outline:

Introduction: “O baby, baby there’ll be no more tears.” In life we want something that does not hurt.
No More...

I. No more tears.
   A. Mary grieved both the death of Jesus and the stealing of His body.
   B. Because of the resurrection our tears are mixed with joy.
      1. The struggle is over—In the Civil War when news came that General Lee had surrendered, Northern officers on the battlefield cried for relief that such an intense struggle was over.
      2. The bereaved at Christian funerals mourn the loss of a loved one but rejoice in the hope of the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:20).

II. No more death.
   A. Jesus overcomes death for all people (2 Tim. 1:10).
   B. We are one with Jesus by faith (Rom. 8:38-39).

III. No more wondering.
   A. The prophecies of Jesus are true (John 2:19).
   B. Justification for sinners is now complete (Rom. 4:25).

Conclusion: There is no more fearful hurt, only the comfort of a living Lord Jesus.

The Last Word

I. It appears that sin has the last word.
   A. Jesus is dead, and His body is missing (v. 13).
   B. Violence and evil in the world, at times, seem to be winning.

II. The last word belongs to Jesus.
   A. Jesus sensitively asks questions of Mary and calls her by name (v. 15).
   B. Jesus has His human body and can be held on to (v. 17).
   C. Jesus sends reassuring words to the brothers (v. 17).

III. The last word now belongs to the people of God.
   A. The struggle with violence and evil continues, but Jesus has triumphed (16:11; 16:20).
   B. The outcome of the life and death struggle rests in the living Lord (1 Cor. 15:54-57).

Gary Schaper

Second Sunday of Easter
John 20:19-31
April 27, 2003

(For clarity and consistency of focus, this study will emphasize primarily the first segment of the Gospel lesson [vv. 19-23], with only passing reference to the second and third segments, about Thomas [vv. 24-29] and the final summary words about the purpose of John’s Gospel [vv. 30-31].)

“He breathed on them.” From somewhere, likely in the deep recesses of our childhood memories, the feelings we get from someone breathing on us are not positive. We picture someone hovering over us, in our face, over our shoulder. “Don’t breathe on me. You’ve got a cold, for crying out loud. Don’t breathe on me. You’ve been eating garlic again, haven’t you? Don’t breathe on me.”
What the Gospel is talking about is not that hovering, intrusive, in-your-face breathing, however. It is actually borrowing a very powerful image from the Old Testament. In fact, this kind of “breathing” is only referred to twice elsewhere. Once is in the creation account back in Genesis: “The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed (εμφυσάω) into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became (not just a clay figurine but) a living being.” What God breathed/infused into Adam was the breath of life, life itself—sort of like artificial respiration, only more so, trying to put breath not just into a body no longer breathing, but into something that had never lived before, and make it/him into a living being, alive because he had the life of God. That special touch, that special breath was more than the other animals were given. That was a special link with God Himself. God shared His own life; He breathed on him.

The other place is in the Book of Ezekiel (different grammar), that strange, surreal picture in chapter 37 of a valley of dry bones. The bones of a decimated, lifeless people. Bones which represent the parched hearts of God’s people in exile—away from the Holy Land, away from the temple, away from God. “The Lord said to me, say to these bones, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin, and you will live.’ As I was speaking, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone; tendons and flesh appeared on them, and skin covered them. The Lord said, ‘Come, O breath, and breathe into these slain.’ And breath entered them, and they came to life and stood up on their feet. And the Lord said, ‘These bones are the whole people of Israel.’”

The Lord does not just breath on, He breathes into. He transforms clumps of clay and parched bones into living people. And in our text He comes into this room of disillusioned, frightened, immobilized disciples. He breathes on them, and turns them into apostles. Incredible!

How He gets into the room the text does not say, but then a locked door is a minor obstacle for one who walked through and back through the door of the grave. However it happened, he came among them and did two things.

First, He showed His hands and side. What the disciples were seeing was not just a ghost, an apparition, or smoke and mirrors. Nor were they seeing a caped crusader able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. What He showed as His mark of identification was not a cape/crown, but His wounds. When Jesus wants people to know who He really is, He takes them to the marks of the cross; He points to where He is closest to them, to His suffering. He comes as the risen one, indeed, but the risen wounded one, the one with scars, the one whose marks of identification are the scar marks of a suffering love. And when we get to heaven, we will likely see those scars too; they will not go away, and He will not outgrow them, because they are who He is. (In the following segment about Thomas, Jesus affirms those scars, even [especially!] for those who doubt, whether in Jesus’ day or in every day since.)

Then this wounded one, the one with the holes and the scars, the one who already gave His life for the disciples, the one who identified Himself as the one who died for them...came and breathed on the disciples.

As we said when we started, we are not talking some irksome, in-your-face breathing, but the breath of life. Peace be with you. That is already part of the breath. Peace, and it enters the room and calms the heart. Peace. That sounds like a magical word this writer knew as a child—and old-timers here have similar memories. When he was a child, he used to bang knees, elbows, and chins pretty regularly. The one reliable bit of comfort was with mother. He would be sobbing.
with tears flowing, and she would listen and say, “Should mommy poos on it?” Now, who can refuse an offer like that? She would poos, and it would be magic—the tears would stop, the sobs would cease, and he would be on his way for another adventure. Perhaps not everyone knows the magical word “poos,” and in fact it was not until many years later that the writer realized that not many people knew what poosing was. (Just to bring you up-to-date, it is a form of the German word “pusten” which means “to blow.”) What seems incredible is that so many people ever survived without poos-power. What was important, of course, was not the word, but the poos-power. It could make owies go away, and restore life. Peace, be with you, peace from the cross, peace from the other side of the grave, peace from God Himself. Peace be with you.

And He breathed and He poosed and He said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Here’s the focus, the climax of it all, because the word Spirit in Greek (and Hebrew) is basically the word for breath itself, or wind or power (πνεύμα, רוח). When our Lord pooses on these disheartened disciples, and when He breathes into their dismal, locked tomb of a room, He is unleashing on them the Spirit of God Himself, the life-giving Spirit that was there way back when the world was made, that made of a clump of clay an Adam, a person, a child of God, the Spirit that brought back from the death of exile a people of God, the Spirit that was sent to be part of the Lord’s baptism (and poos on the Lord Himself), the Spirit of God who can take those emptied, hope-less disciples and make apostles of them: “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.” Out of this room, out of the prisons we construct for ourselves (the pain and hurt we cause and we suffer, the grief we mourn, the guilt and shame we carry as lonely burdens, the expectations we fear, the walls we erect, the masks we wear, the weapons we devise to defend ourselves). “Peace be on you. My peace, not as the world gives. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you”...to poos on this world, to breathe the breath of God, to share His Spirit.

From the cross our Lord proclaimed, “It is finished,” and indeed the work of redemption is finished. Especially in view of the resurrection, what else can there be? From the vantage point of cross and resurrection, however, our Lord initiates the mission of salvation to His church, an extension of His ministry of touching the clods and bones, the bruises and tears around us, and of turning the signs of death into the joy of life, our Lord’s life. That is a life worth living!

*Suggested outline:*

**A Breath of Fresh Air**

I. Bad breath.
II. Breath of Life.
   A. Creation.
   B. New creation (Ezekiel).
III. Breath of New Life, given by crucified and resurrected Lord.
IV. Breath of the Spirit.
V. For Christians, a breath of fresh air.

Henry Rowold