



EASTER

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

(See today's worship unit for more than fifty songs and many great worship ideas for Easter.)

Sunday, April 24, 2011

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Lection – Romans 6:3-11 and Psalm 118:1-2 (New Revised Standard Version)

Romans 6:3-11

(v. 3) Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? (v. 4) Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. (v. 5) For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (v. 6) We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. (v. 7) For whoever has died is freed from sin. (v. 8) But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. (v. 9) We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. (v. 10) The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. (v. 11) So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Psalm 118:1-2

(v.1) O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures for ever! (v. 2) Let Israel say, 'His steadfast love endures for ever.'

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Easter is the highest day on the Christian liturgical calendar. It is the Sunday on which Christians celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In other words, this is the day that "He arose, he arose, hallelujah, Christ arose!" All the music, Scriptures, preaching, and prayers center on this fact. Thus, robust celebratory praise is in order.

A part of the Easter resurrection praise historically has been the incorporation of the rite of baptism. The early church tied Easter and baptism together because many new converts were baptized on Easter morning. Through baptism immersion, believers died and rose with Christ symbolically. They participated in the Lord's death; they were buried. But they also entered into the new life sealed by Jesus' resurrection; when they came out of the water, they rose just like Jesus. Baptism is an outward visible sign of the meaning of Good Friday and Easter. Christ died. We die. Christ rose. We rise. This is reason to celebrate and shout! "Take me to the water, take me to the water, take me to the water to be baptized" is a hymn sung in many black congregations. In the light of Easter, we yearn for these baptismal waters of the Spirit, because in these waters, one will experience the newness of the resurrected life and be made alive in Christ.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Romans 6:3-11 and Psalm 118:1-2

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

In 2005, the rite of baptism converged with death in a surreal manner. A Baptist minister was stepping into a baptismal pool when he reached out to adjust a nearby microphone, which produced a literal electric shock that sent emotional shock waves through his congregation and family. He was electrocuted. He died as he was wading in the waters of baptism, preparing for a new convert to be baptized. This physical death in the church was indeed a shock to those present. No one expects death to be in the confines of a church. The church is supposed to be about life and especially in baptism. But what happened tragically to this pastor in an accident happens every day all around us: Death.

People die from so-called freak accidents. People die due to health reasons like cancer or obesity. People die due to senseless violence on the streets sparked by discontent. People die due to wars over land and money or in clashes over tyrannical governments. Death may not even be physical but emotional or psychological due to broken marriages or friendships. There are walking dead people in our societies. Whatever the manifestation of death, it is pervasive in our communities. One scholar refers to these as "little deaths"¹ and no one is immune to them, not even pastors, though we may think they are spiritual superheroes. This talk about death may disappoint some on Easter, but there ain't no Easter without Good Friday, no resurrection without the crucifixion. I am saying that "the gospel is bad news before it is good news."² The gospel begins with telling the truth about "tragedy" but it does not end there! We may die but we will live. Christ died but he rose that we might live. Through death comes life.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

This is not a cozy Easter word per se but it is a truthful one: Death before life, dying to live. The apostle Paul speaks about this when he discusses baptism, the only reference to baptism in the book of Romans. Paul was not talking about a physical death like the one experienced by the pastor mentioned above, but it is a death nonetheless. He tells the

Romans that they have “died to sin” (6:2) and then he explains it (vv. 5-11). One could not ignore Paul’s words about death even if they wanted to because it permeates these verses. Baptism is immersion into a new way of life; in fact, it is “a newness of life” (v. 4). But to enter this new life, one must endure a death, a “baptism into death” (v. 4). Perhaps this is not what one would expect for Easter, but it is what Paul teaches. He stresses the connection between baptism and death twice (vv. 3-4) but speaks about “death” or “dead” or “die” or “died” at least 13 times! This does not include when he talks about being “crucified” (v. 6) and even “buried” (v. 4). Paul is making the same point in different ways, just in case it wasn’t heard in the first hearing.

But what is key for Paul is that this baptism is not our own. We are “buried *with him*” and “crucified *with him*” and “baptized *into Christ Jesus*” and “united *with him* in a death like his” because “we have died *with Christ*.” This should be no surprise because when Christ calls us, he calls us to die that we might live. We are not alone in this endeavor but are “with him.” Our prayers of “I want Jesus to walk with me” are answered as Jesus walks the road of death and suffering ahead of us, that “death he died” (v. 10). In this context, it is a death to sin and the death of sin. And because of the death of Christ, we are no longer enslaved to sin (v. 6) but “freed” (v. 7) from it. The dying leads to living. However, much of the dying that occurs on the streets of urban communities does not lead to living whatsoever. Some, like Dr. King, spoke of redemptive suffering, but even those who have died to give life to others have never lived again. They were buried, perhaps in an unmarked grave, had the earth’s dirt thrown over them, never to see an open tomb. It is within this tension that one must read Paul. Identification with the suffering and death of Jesus stretches all the way back to the Negro spirituals, but identifying with his resurrection has been more difficult because of the realities of many black people in the world in which the suffering and pain are more glaring.

Through Paul’s eyes, it is Christ who leads the way in this life-giving death because “Christ was raised from the dead” (vv. 4, 9). To be clear, Christ died but “he lives, he lives” (v. 10). The baptism of death may be real, but this baptism is also one of life. At four different points, when Paul speaks of the images of death, he counters it with the images of life (vv. 4, 5, 8, 11). For instance, “if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (v. 5). The literary form here is important because death does not have the last word. Resurrection life does. It’s always the images of death followed by the images of life. He might have been crucified but as the unknown black bards proclaimed, “he ‘rose.” Death comes first, but life is last, lasting forever. Because Christ was “raised” he “will never die again” (v. 9). Death is destroyed “once for all” (v. 10). The death of sin no longer stings. Sin’s dominion cannot reign in the resurrected life of Christ because “the death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God” (v. 10). Death is mentioned three times here and it is emphasized “He died, he died.” But life counters with being voiced three times as well and we read “He lives, he lives.” Life has the final word. There is a struggle between death and life, but death meets its match in the resurrection of Christ.

A baptism into the death of Jesus is a baptism into the life of Jesus, so one is “dead” but “alive.” Baptism is a tomb and a womb. “Dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

The death of sin can't defeat us anymore because Christ has already defeated it. Death is buried but death can't live again. His tomb can't be rolled away. But the tomb of Christ is still empty! He was "raised" so that we might be raised too in order to "walk in newness of life" (v. 4; cf. Deut 13:4-5; Isa 33:15). That means life is today—not tomorrow, but right now. This baptism into death is a baptism into life because "Up from the grave He arose with the mighty triumph o'er his foes, He arose the victor from the dark domain and He lives forever with his saints to reign, He arose, he arose, Hallelujah, Christ arose."

In light of this, the Psalms passage is appropriate as it "gives thanks to the Lord, for he is good" (v. 1; 118:29). This is the starting and ending place for our encounter with God—thanksgiving. This Psalm was composed for a service of thanksgiving. Of course, life happens, death happens, suffering is present, even as the rest of this Psalm reveals (vv. 5, 10-13). But one thing is for sure, God is good all the time and all the time God is good. This Psalm is known as an Egyptian "Hallel" or "praise" psalm in the Jewish tradition. It was sung after the Passover meal (cf. Matt 26:30). How appropriate it should be used on Easter in celebration of Christ the Lamb "passing over" from death to life. God's goodness is evident because according to the Psalmist, "his steadfast love endures forever." (vv. 1-2). One time is not enough, but the Psalmist has to repeat it twice. In fact, in verses 3-4, we hear it again—"his steadfast love endures forever!" If the reader didn't get it the first time, perhaps the second, third, or fourth time would sink in. No matter what one endures, God's love is eternal, a love that won't let us go, a love that dies and lives for us. A love that was so strong that even a tomb could not prevent it from reaching us. This steadfast love is the reason why we are told to give thanks to the Lord. So just as the Psalmist repeats that God's steadfast love endures forever, on Easter, Christian hearts should join the repetitive refrain of Hezekiah Walker's "Grateful" and sing "grateful, grateful, grateful...gratefulness is flowing my heart." The musical repetition of those words echoes the ongoing eternal steadfast love of God. It goes on and on and on, with or without us. God's love lives on. It can't be stopped. It won't be stopped. Death can't win but God wins. Thank God that his love never dies! "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good." In other words, on Easter, remember that "the Lord reigns" (Ps. 47; 93; 95-99).

Celebration

Up from the grave, He arose. Because Christ rose, we can rise too. Death no longer has dominion over us. He defeated Death once and for all. His love for you can't be stopped. Give thanks to the Lord for he is surely good! His steadfast love endures forever! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of these passages include:

Romans 6:3-11

Sounds: The waters of baptism flowing; hear Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever."; hear others say, "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.";

Sights: The baptismal waters.

Psalm 118:1-2

Sounds: The people of God offering unrestrained praise for the enduring love of God; and

Sights: People appreciative for the resurrection praising God on Easter.

III. Suggestions

- One might title a sermon based on the Romans text “Dead but Alive.” Also, because there is so much emphasis on death and life in Romans with the images of death always coming first, one could shape a sermon in that way too. The preacher could talk about death in the text and in our world then move to talk about life in the text and in our world. In light of this sermon movement, it might be useful to consult The Four Pages of a Sermon by Paul Scott Wilson.
- Hymns such as “He Lives,” Kirk Franklin’s “Don’t Cry,” and other Resurrection songs would be good. With the emphasis on baptism in the Romans passage, spirituals like “Wade in the Water” could be utilized in some way in the service too. See today’s worship unit for more than fifty additional suggested songs and many great ideas for Easter worship services.

Notes

1. Lathrop, Gordon. The Pastor: A Spirituality. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006. p. 125.
2. Buechner, Frederick. Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy & Fairy Tale. New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1977. p. 7.