



ASH WEDNESDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Wednesday, March 9, 2011

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Lection – 2 Corinthians 5:20b–2 Corinthians 6:10 (New Revised Standard Version)

2 Corinthians 5:20b-21

(v. 20b) we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (v. 21) For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

2 Corinthians 6:1-10

(v. 1) As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. (v. 2) For he says, ‘At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.’ See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! (v. 3) We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, (v. 4) but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, (v. 5) beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger; (v. 6) by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, (v. 7)

truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; (v. 8) in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; (v. 9) as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; (v. 10) as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Ash Wednesday begins the Christian season of Lent, a period of 40 days before Easter (not including Sundays) when followers of Christ are called upon to practice self-denial and self-examination. Aristotle once said that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Lent is when Christians pause and reflect to examine their values, their goals, their behavior and conduct, and their core relationships with God and with one another. The date of Ash Wednesday, unlike the date for Christmas, changes every year; it is determined by the lunar calendar that allows Easter and Passover to be observed as closely together as possible in keeping with the biblical stories surrounding the passion of Jesus Christ.

Ash Wednesday recalls Jesus’ victory over Satan and his temptation in the wilderness as told in Matthew 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13. On Ash Wednesday some Christians have ashes in the shape of a cross placed on their forehead as a sign that they too want to seek to overcome Satan and temptation in their lives. That becomes their focus for the next 40 days. The practice of giving up some favorite food or enjoyable activity during Lent is symbolic of our determination to give up whatever serves as an obstacle to a faithful relationship with God.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: 2 Corinthians 5:20b–2 Corinthians 6:10

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Ash Wednesday comes right after our national consumptive observance known as Christmas. Today, gone is the story of impoverished parents, a homeless child, and a ruthless king grasping for power. In its place has come three months of uninterrupted concentration on buying, spending, and consuming. Christmas now runs from the day after Halloween to several days after New Year’s Day. During that time we face an endless barrage of commercials urging us to spend more than we have to buy what we do not need or cannot afford. We are constantly reminded that holiday spending drives the national economy; therefore it is viewed as almost unpatriotic not to go into debt for Christmas. Then, no sooner has Christmas ended than we are encouraged to start saving for next Christmas. Thank God for Ash Wednesday that stops us in our tracks and makes us as Christians ask ourselves what we have been doing for the last four months. Our identity is not tied to what we own or what we give to each other; it is tied to our relationship with God through Jesus Christ! We need to observe Ash Wednesday because it makes us look at ourselves through the lens of our faith.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

This passage that runs through two chapters of 2 Corinthians is especially powerful when read by preachers in the 21st century. Paul is doing several things at once in this passage, and we would

do well to heed all of them. First, he is focusing on the core message of the gospel, which is the need to be reconciled to God. He imagines the preacher as an ambassador carrying a message from God to be delivered precisely as written: “be reconciled to God.” The invitation for reconciliation does not come with any provisions for what needs to be done by those who hear this message. Reconciliation is as simple as accepting by faith the fact that our sins have been forgiven by the sacrifice of Christ at Calvary. A sinless savior has died so that a sinful world can be saved. There is no need for any other work to be done. As Paul says in 6:3, “we are putting no obstacles in anyone’s way.” There is no mystery that needs to be unraveled, no added works that any individual must perform, no seeds that must be sown into any ministry in order for the work of salvation to be accomplished. Reconciliation is as simple as Romans 10:9, which says, “If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you shall be saved.”

We need to heed the question raised by Gardner C. Taylor, who felt the need to ask in an article “Is our preaching Christian?”¹ His concern was that we as preachers have allowed so many other themes to work their way into our sermons that the true gospel and the name of Jesus are seldom mentioned. We are more focused on prosperity than we are on repentance. We are more concerned about “name it and claim it” than we are about having our name written in the Lamb’s Book of Life. We are more focused on which group we will demonize on a given Sunday than on our Savior who was crucified and resurrected to provide new life for us all. Paul reminds us that we are not freelance speakers on topics of our own choosing; we are ambassadors for God charged with delivering God’s message as God has delivered it to us.

The other part of Paul’s appeal in this passage involves his recollections of what he and others had to endure in their attempts to faithfully deliver the message that was entrusted to them. As he will do again in 2 Corinthians 11:23-29, Paul uses verses 4-5 to remind his readers that adherence to the message of salvation by faith has required great endurance, because he has encountered afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, and hunger. I think about what Paul endured for the sake of a faithful word, and then I look at what minor inconveniences can cause me to complain that my burden is too heavy. What preacher among us can stand with Paul on this matter of endurance? We who are so preoccupied with luxury cars and trying to ensure that we have vast retirements and multi-million-dollar sanctuaries built in the shadow of impoverished neighborhoods and often at the expense of the tithes and offerings of poor people.

What do we know about true endurance of any hardship we have faced because of our preaching of the gospel? What is on the record about us in this regard? We need Ash Wednesday, because it forces us to examine ourselves and see if we are still true ambassadors of Jesus Christ. Or have we become self-indulgent proponents of a gospel of wealth that is not only indefensible in the Scriptures but will be even more indefensible according to Matthew 25:31-46, when we stand before God in the judgment and are asked what we did for “the least of these.” And if we are not preaching the gospel of wealth, are we guilty of preaching a sluggish, dull, stay-inside-the-church-doors-and-do-little gospel? Does our preaching create ambassadors, give them courage and endurance?

Not only does Paul challenge us according to the issue of endurance in the face of hardships, but he also challenges us concerning our character and personal conduct. In verses 6-10 Paul turns his attention not just to what he has said, but more importantly to how he has lived. Paul speaks of purity, patience, knowledge, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, and truthful speech. In the spirit of Philippians 4:8-10, we should seriously reflect upon and pray about these words on Ash Wednesday and throughout Lent; and having thought about them we should put them into practice.

It has been said that people would rather see a good sermon than hear one. That means they would like to see the values and principles of the faith at work in the life of the preacher, and not just hear the words coming from his or her mouth. We are ambassadors for a great ruler whose message is one of reconciliation. We as preachers should live as people who have put behind them anything that has been an obstacle in our own spiritual formation, and then we should challenge those to whom we preach with this simple declaration: "Be reconciled to God" and be God's ambassador!

Challenge

The biggest challenge facing most African American preachers and churches is that we do not strongly adhere to many liturgical observances. Thus, many African American churches know little about Advent, Epiphany, Ash Wednesday, Lent, or Pentecost. We would do well to consider these special seasons of the Christian calendar and the opportunities they present us for worship and renewal. Ash Wednesday invites us to stand with David in Psalm 139:23 and cry out: "Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts. See if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

Descriptive Details

In addition to the sights, sounds, and colors that can be determined from these texts (especially with the use of a little imagination), both texts offer the opportunity to use a metaphor that will help make them easier to understand during preaching.

The word ambassador can be used as a metaphor in preaching these texts. A metaphor is a figure of speech founded on resemblance, by which an idea is transferred from an object to which it properly belongs to another in such a manner that a comparison is implied though not formally expressed. Thus, "That man is a fox" is a metaphor. The reference in Hebrews 12:1 to life as a race is also a metaphor. If it was said, that man is "like" a fox, more than likely a simile is being used, not a metaphor.²

Today, amidst numerous wars and a global economy, we hear a great deal about diplomacy and diplomats, but we know very little about their work. This passage challenges us to examine that profession and then apply its rules to our work as preachers and perhaps use it in a sermon as a metaphor so that it is easily palatable to modern listeners. Ambassadors live in one country but they represent another. They are the face and voice of the head of state on whose behalf they serve. We who preach stand in exactly the same position. We are in this world, but our message

comes from another realm—the realm and reign of God. Let us be ever faithful to the God who has sent us and to the message that has been entrusted to us.

III. Other Sermonic Comments or Suggestions

This passage from 2 Corinthians invites us to consider other passages as well. Consider 2 Corinthians 11:23-29, Philippians 3:4-9 and 4:8-9, and Romans 5:1-5. In my book, Living Water for Thirsty Souls,³ this practice of considering various passages related to one's primary text is called Links. Every sermon can be improved through the use of this device.

Notes

1. Taylor, Gardner C. "Is Our Preaching Christian?" The African American Pulpit. Germantown, TN: Hope for Life International, Inc., (Summer) 2009. pp. 40–42.
2. Simmons, Martha and Henry Mitchell. A Study Guide to Accompany Celebration and Experience in Preaching. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993, p. 27.
3. McMickle, Marvin A. Living Water for Thirsty Souls: Unleashing the Power of Exegetical Preaching. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2001. pp. 132–141.