

Sermon Notes from CMJ
Fourth Sunday in Lent - Year B

RCL Readings - Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

ACNA Readings - 2 Chronicles 36:14-23; Psalm 122; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 6:1-15

Revised Common Lectionary

Introduction - Most congregations will recognize these familiar texts. They offer the preacher two applications, two responses from his or her listeners when preached. They are a nearly perfect set of evangelistic texts. Those who do not know the Lord can be called into a relationship with him. For the believing listener whose first love has cooled or whose life reflects a cheapened understanding of God's grace, the call to faithful discipleship is compelling.

Common Theme - As implied above, the four texts of this lectionary selection give a wonderful opportunity to explore biblical salvation. The Tanakh (Old Testament) readings recount the Lord bringing temporal salvation to his less-than-obedient people. The Epistle and Gospel readings are classics for sharing the gospel with those who do not know the Lord. Their juxtaposition allows the preacher to present the full gospel message of grace and obedience that brings eternal salvation.

First Reading: Numbers 21:4-9 - This account concerns the people of God, not those outside a relationship with him. After abundant evidence of the Lord's power, provision, and presence, faithless human self-centeredness about a lack of conveniences preoccupied the Israelites. Their inability to trust the character of the Lord continually resurfaced, usually around some issue of security or food and drink. Their fear turned to rejection, to sin. Consequentially the plague of serpents struck, and they repented. The bronze serpent mounted on a pole is now a universal symbol of medical care.

Hezekiah eventually destroyed the bronze serpent because the Israelites began to revere it as a talisman or magic charm. The (memorized) commentary of Jesus day described the spiritual transaction that took place for the Israelites: "when the people looked up and gave their hearts to their Heavenly Father, they were healed" (Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 3:8). In a world of Covid discontent and longing for convenience and comfort, we can show believers the way of repentance and that renewed discipleship arises directly from repentance and turning back to the Lord.

Second Reading: Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22 - This edit of the reading gives the preacher an easy path to applying the text. The Israelites were learning to have a relationship with the Lord. Their concern was for temporal salvation. Their sin brought temporal chastisement from God. It is a helpful reminder for contemporary Christians that chastisement remains an option the Lord might exercise to get our attention. Verses 1-3 highlight the goodness of God's character, which

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the Israelites slandered with complaints, in contrast with their ingratitude. Repentance and looking to the Lord's mercy remains the biblical way to restore one's relationship with the Lord.

Third Reading: Ephesians 2:1-10 - This glorious text is best saved for last. The preacher can focus on the mercy and grace that God offers through faith in Jesus. The way to the cross leads through repentance. The adventurous preacher will explain the phrase "following the prince of the power of the air" in order to burst the sense that salvation is a consumer choice rather than a life and death matter. For good reason, the doctrine "For by grace you have been saved through faith" is preached to describe the depths of God's love for us and the magnanimity of his character. Of late, it has been abused. In biblical times (and still throughout the Middle East) it was assumed that a gift had strings attached. God's grace is neither free nor cheap. Verse 10 makes clear that a gift so great as salvation unto eternal life does come with the "strings" of a transformed life and good works done on our Lord's behalf. These are an ideal quartet of texts from which to invite some to accept Jesus as his/her savior.

Fourth Reading: John 3:14-21 - As the second main preaching point, John 3:14-15 segue easily from temporal to eternal salvation. Of note is John's care throughout his gospel to connect Jesus of Nazareth with messianic prophecy. Connecting not only the "lifting up," but also Deuteronomy 18:18 to this account strengthens Jesus' identity as the Messiah, but also demonstrates God's character; he is always as good as his word.

Despite it being more widely known, emphasize the proper first-century understanding of belief as trust. Faith is having sufficient trust in the character of God that one will keep obeying in the face of doubt, opposition, or demonic counterarguments (e.g., "How can my repentance lead to my forgiveness just because Jesus died on the cross?"). The passion of human pride to be saved by pulling up one's bootstraps is nearly irresistible in some shame-based personalities. Others prefer the cost-free grace that requires nothing but cognitive assent. The nature of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus was not to persuade him that eternal life (the world to come) was real, but that religious observance never brought it about. Rather, Nicodemus needed to face that he was under judgement because his religious instincts were separating him from God, creating the judgement brought about by his own choice. In an age that hardly believes it is sinful, no message could be more apropos.

Anglican Church of North America

Introduction - Preaching these texts together will prove a challenge. It is one of those times when one doubts one's own logic or asks, "what were they thinking?" Any of the texts are worthy of a sermon, but preaching a theme will be harder.

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Common Theme - If the collect of the day states the intended theme for the preacher, then Jesus the Bread of Life should be the sermon title. That theme can be explored through both the Gospel reading and the epistle. The Ephesians 2 text can expand the Bread of Life statement of Jesus into either an evangelistic presentation, a call to return to the Lord fully from the distractions and idolatry of modern life, or the purpose of salvation by grace that results in living verse 10. Second Chronicles 36 is a rich preaching text that analyzes the consequences of Israel's disobedience and provides an obvious application to modern, Western life. Psalm 122, part of the Psalms of Ascent, is one of a collection of traditional Lenten texts. See note below.

First Reading: 2 Chronicles 36:14-23 - There is scholarly agreement that Chronicles, written after Israel's exile, recounts Israel's independent history in order to explore what went wrong spiritually in hopes of preventing its errors. If one establishes the parallel between Israel and the church as the people of God, it can be taught first in its historic context and then applied to the Western church today. It can also be applied to a country once Christian but now turning away from the Lord. That said, if the church is to be the salt of society, then repentance must begin among us.

Most Gentile Christians have a shadowy grasp of how important and how shattering were Israel's destruction and the loss of the temple. The pervasive belief in Judah was that the Lord would protect Judah because the temple was in Jerusalem, just as the Western church is tempted to think we will escape God's displeasure by simply having right doctrine. It was a 9/11 moment for the spiritual leaders of Israel, beginning with Ezra. It spawned the reform movement that resulted in the passion to please the Lord that eventually became Pharisaism. It is an appropriate warning to the church that being theologically right is not the same as being pleasing to the Lord.

Second Reading: Psalm 122 - The Psalms of Ascent extend back into distant Jewish history and all the way forward to its application in the church as a metaphor for the Lenten journey. We know that by the Second Temple period these Psalms were sung by Jewish pilgrims as they climbed the hill upon which Jerusalem sits. This was in obedience to Exodus 23:17. Three times each year every Israelite man was to make this journey. Jesus' visits to Jerusalem usually reflect one of these feasts. A prayer of blessing and intercession for Jerusalem, the psalm can be used to explain the plan of God to save the world by creating and using the Jewish people and then Jesus as their representative to draw humanity to knowledge and relationship with himself.

Third Reading: Ephesians 2:1-10 - There are few texts so often taught among Western evangelicals as "salvation by grace through faith." The text can be used to teach what eating the Bread of Life looks like spiritually and experientially. However, it must *all* be taught, not just a portion. The preacher must distinguish that the "result of works" in verse 9 refers to the expectation of earning merit with God by doing religious things, different from the good works

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(holiness and agape care for others) that are the required result of the salvation through grace received.

It is a great irony that the distortion of grace teaching in these most recent days has resulted in de facto granting permission to a self-indulgent “salvation experience” that neither transforms lives nor produces the humility and love required to become like Jesus. The bread of life cannot be served without the cross of Christ. Therefore, it would be remiss of the preacher to not connect this theology of repentance and grace-filled forgiveness with the regular reminder of body and blood, bread and wine, that is Holy Communion.

Fourth Reading: John 6:1-15 - John 6 is one of those passages that long hid a Messianic revelation when the church overlooked its Jewish roots. Although the miracle of feeding the 5,000 is impressive as an event, the purpose of its inclusion in the text is lost without its reference in the extra-biblical texts of post-exilic Jewish religion. The Mishnah, an aural rabbinic commentary memorized by all rabbis and most religious men, taught that when the provision of manna to the Israelites ceased, one *ephah* (litre) was preserved in the ark of the covenant, and the other was preserved in heaven. It stated additionally that when the Messiah came he would bring this manna with him. Therefore, the crowd, seeing Jesus create bread for them as God created manna for their ancestors, assumed Jesus was the Messiah. That is why Jesus feared they would try to make him king. It also adds to the strength of Jesus’ argument that he is the Bread of Life.

About the author - The Rev. Canon Daryl Fenton assumed the role of executive director for CMJ in Israel in 2019, after having served in the same capacity for CMJ’s USA branch. Cn. Daryl previously served as canon to Archbishop Robert Duncan of the Anglican Church in North America, overseeing mission relationships. He also served as canon and chief operating officer for the Anglican Communion Network, a founding organization of the ACNA. He continues to serve the current archbishop, the Most Rev. Foley Beach, as Canon for the Middle East. Daryl is married to Sandy. They have two grown children, as well as three grandchildren. The Fentons reside in Jerusalem, Israel.