

“THE SERMON AS BENEDICTION”

A Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent, February 21, 2016

Text: Luke 13:31-35

If I promise to preach a very short sermon this morning, I hope you will allow me to take a few minutes before the sermon to talk about sermons in general.

A good sermon is a topical benediction. A benediction with a special topic.

At the end of the service, you are accustomed to my extending you a few words of blessing which are very general:

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord's face shine on you with grace and mercy; the Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace.

That benediction summarizes everything that has happened in the last hour or so. You should be coming here to receive a gift. The fact that you return to church again and again (if you do) tells me that you are conscious of your need for a gift, and you believe the gift may be obtained here.

Everything about the service should be understood in that light. If anything unpleasant gets brought up it should be by way of reminding us why we need the gift. For example: We do not confess our sins because catharsis is good for us, but because we need the forgiveness which is offered here.

The sermon is also part of this hour long benediction, by which God blesses his people.

For me to preach a good sermon, I must do two things. First, I have to connect whatever trouble there is in our lives with what Scripture says is our Root Trouble. We all have particular and even unique troubles. Some of us feel swamped with troubles; others do not feel terribly bothered with troubles; some have numerous offsetting “blessings” which may even conceal our troubles, temporarily. However much trouble we have, whether it is disturbing to us or we are oblivious to it, Scripture teaches us not to doubt that we are in Big Trouble, and that the Big Trouble stems from something being amiss between us and God.

So my first task is to help you see yourself and your troubles somehow in the description of what is wrong with the whole world. The Law of God does this for us, and that's usually the focus of the first part of a sermon.

The second thing I have to do is to apply a particular Remedy to the Big Trouble lying under all our particular troubles. The Remedy is the Gospel, which has everything to do with Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection and our baptism into Christ and becoming united with all who are in Christ through that Baptism. Somehow I have to bring that Remedy to bear on everybody's troubles.

This is very difficult. I need help with this, because you have a wide variety of troubles. First of all, I don't know them all; but if I did I could not draw a precise map to the resolution of your troubles through the Gospel. So I could simply despair of being effective, and think that the Gospel is not relevant to your troubles. Or I could push on and hope that you will reach out to the sermon, listening carefully and applying the Gospel to your own life.

Thus a sermon springs up in a context of many human woes; seeks a unifying thread by understanding them all in relation to God; and then applies the Word of Salvation to the complex web of woe in actual people's real lives.

This is basically how they relate. Ingratitude and lack of faith in God lies at the root of everything we do wrong, every sin. Not just theft and murder, but rudeness and incivility. No matter how much we have, we want more. We want more peace and quiet, more activity, more money, more friends, more fame, more time, whatever.

Sermons have a problem with never being specific enough to make that sort of connection for everyone. They always seem to oversimplify. The preacher can only do a small piece of the work. The listeners have to do the rest. You have to want to receive the benediction which is on offer. You have to figure out, in spite of the limitations of my sermon, how that Gospel is Good news for you.

I could just settle for saying “We all sin, we all need forgiveness, Jesus died for our sins, we are all forgiven,” and let it go at that—but although that is the truth, if it is stated so baldly it does no more good than ampicillin does when you leave it in the bottle.

Summing up: The sermon is a benediction. In a variety of oversimplified ways, sermons assert that there is good news kin times of trouble when we discern how they are connected to our lack of faith in God, because Jesus Christ has achieved what is necessary to heal that basic lack of faith.

The sermon will start with a text, because it is only the texts of Scripture which make us believe there is hope for us in our troubles through Christ. In this case, we have a weird text. But I’ve used up most of my time already, so I’m going to rely on you to refresh your memory by reviewing the gospel reading as I preach.

The sermon

Today’s story about Jesus is just another case of the same thing we have everywhere in Scripture, and everywhere in our own lives. Two things are happening that are obvious.

God is giving gifts to people; and people are resisting.

Stalemate. That is the status quo of the world before Christ. Jesus wanted to heal the possessed people, but Herod wanted to kill him. Jesus wanted to gather the people of Jerusalem, but they would not let him. We need good news.

Now it is time for the Jesus Christ factor to come into play, if I can manage.

What we see in this story if we look long and beg for benediction is this: Although people are not that open to what Jesus is doing, Jesus is going to insist on offering God’s mercy to absolutely anyone who **will** receive it. He will continue his healing even if it means Herod tries to kill him. He will go to Jerusalem even if it kills him. Jesus, who is all about mercy, is not going to be stopped by people.

Thank goodness. Because if Jesus just gave everyone what they deserved, you and I would not be able to take good news away from this reading back into our own lives. Our resistance to God’s grace would be met only with God’s judgment.

If God just chose this situation to express his fury at those who frustrate his gracious design, we would have no gospel. But Jesus *must go to Jerusalem* to die for us! God in his grace is going to double down on expressing the love out of which the original gifts were given to us by giving us his only Son to die for us, unworthy though we are of the original gifts.

God will do this in order to get us to accept God’s offer to restore us to himself and to one another, not by making things worse but by offering a new gift. Call it the forgiveness of sins,

call it peace, call it unity with God, call it life. It is a whole cloth, not piecemeal. God extends the olive branch to us, says “all is forgiven,” and invites us to receive new life.

As long as we live in a perpetual state of dissatisfaction with God, not acknowledging God’s gifts, we will never know peace or freedom. But as soon as we move into the kingdom of God, we can live—even though we are still dogged by the same troubles—we can live as thankful children of God.

To sum up:

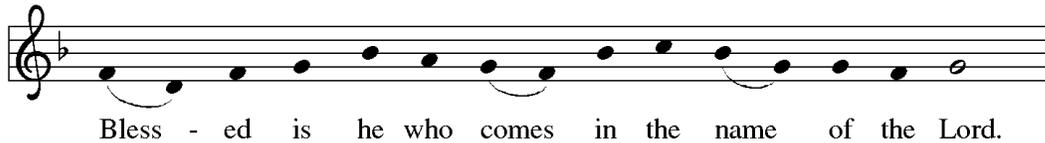
Act 1: God is giving gifts to people; Act 2: People resisting and refuse to be God’s children.

But then (Act 3, the Gospel): God tells us resistance is futile, and offers his Son for sinners because he does not want us to suffer the consequences of our sin but would prefer for us to live in him and for him.

This has incredible consequences for every trouble I’ve ever heard about, and it is attached to the Jesus who insists on getting where he is going and doing what he wants to do.

Jesus said, “You will not see me again until the time comes when you say ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

Well, if you’re ready, it’s time for us to see Jesus and welcome his good news. So let’s all sing:



Amen.

