



Images in Lent

The Gospel Lessons

Lent 1—Luke 4:1-13

- Imagery plays within two alternative “worlds” in our communal consciousness:

Motif 1: The unmoving is “stable,” permanent, and “solid as a rock.”

Biblical images—God is a rock/fortress/unmoved. Christ is chief cornerstone.

Cultural images—Prudential Rock, etc.

That which is moving is “flighty,” impermanent, insignificant.

Biblical images—The wicked, like windblown chaff, etc.

Cultural images—gnats, flies, and “no-see-’ems.”

Lent 1

Motif 2: That which is not moving is “static,” “stuck,” incapable of change and growth.

Biblical imagery—any idol, Herod and all Jerusalem (as compared with the star).

Cultural imagery—“Dumb as a bag of hammers.”

That which is capable of movement has potency, is “dynamic,” and is capable of transformation.

Biblical imagery—Prodigal son “comes to himself...”

Cultural imagery—four-wheel drive vehicle in snow commercial on TV, etc.

Our Lection: Motif 1 or 2?



Analogies

- “Stone”
- “Loaf”

Shaping a Sermonic Plot

- “Command this stone to become a loaf of bread,” offers the Devil.

“No,” Jesus replies, “Not by bread alone.”

(Not for the Evil One. That stone will just remain a stone,...to this day!)

Contemporary imagery:

Shaping a Sermonic Plot

- So all kinds of “rock-hard” traditions and attitudes remain with us,...to this day.

Example set:

- But to announce the reign of God, Jesus will take stone-like folks and transform us into the One Loaf that is his Body.

Image:

- So here we are at the beginning of Lent—and the Spirit is working within us like leaven in the dough. “One loaf rising...” (Illustration: bread-baking abundance)



Lent 3—Luke 13:1-9

“The Barren Fig Tree”

- The parable presents two dominant images, one within the other:
 - Vineyard: Perennial metaphor for God’s covenant people in the Hebrew Scriptures. And with that connection, the vineyard can be either a place of curse (where the grapes set the teeth on edge) or of blessing (with the vines bearing the finest grapes for the finest wine).



Lent 3

- Within the vineyard image in that of the fig tree, another biblical metaphor, but now for kingdom abundance. (In the fullness of time, each person sits under their own fig tree—Shalom.)
- By way of background, a fig tree was considered unclean for the first three years—no figs could be harvested. Also, there was nothing unusual about planting fig trees in a vineyard. So, after three years, the time for bearing and harvesting figs has come, all within a fruitful vineyard—a Russian egg metaphor of abundance and shalom!



Lent 3

- Problem is, for three years following its initial three years—six in total—the fig tree has been barren. No fruit. (And given this dismal record, the likelihood of any change in the situation is nil.)
- We will let the image within the image shape the moves within a Buttrick sermon in the mode of reflectivity. (Note that each move will need to be imaged out of the lived experience of the listeners.)

Lent 3

- Move 1: There is barrenness in the vineyard.
(Since we are certain of our ecclesial/covenantal location, we will look around the church and the churches for signs of barrenness.)

Lent 3

- Faced with a lack of fruitfulness, the owner responds as we do. “Cut it down!” he announces. “Why should it be wasting the soil?”

(Now we shift to some analysis of this tendency to “cut down” those things and people we deem unfruitful. Shall we deploy other images, examples, or an illustration?)

Lent 3

- But the gardener speaks up, defending this barren thing. “Sir, leave it alone,” he cries out. What an odd word to hear from our gardener God!

(Probably a terse, powerful illustration—a story not heard before—may function best here.)

Lent 3

- But this fig tree is not just getting a reprieve. It is receiving promises of care and abundant love. The gardener will dig around it and put manure on it. Grace, not wrath.

(Here is the crucial issue of the sermon: How to name grace! What are the images of this nurture and care, though we be unworthy?)

Lent 3

- “If after a year,” responds the gardener. There is a season in which grace is offered; that season is now. This is the year of the Lord’s favor. It is the season for bearing much fruit. How tragic it would be to squander this year of grace.

(Now the note of boundaries and yet opportunity comes into play. What would it look like if we now respond to grace with fruitfulness. Perhaps an example system will work best here...)

Lent 5—John 12:1-8

One approach to the interpretation of biblical narratives is to discern the oppositions within the story that drive its plot and give fullness and interest to its characters. Identifying these oppositions within the story will also provide the preacher with generative tensions which will provide the way toward a homiletical plot. We therefore begin by spotting the profound oppositions within the story and its larger context as well.

Lent 5

Oppositions

- Death and life (at present, symbolized in Lazarus)
- Banquet six days before Passover and Passover
- The smell at Lazarus' tomb and the aroma created by Mary's selfless act of adoration and anointing.
- The proper social roles of a Jewish woman in the first cen. and Mary's intimate and "shameful" action.

Lent 5

Oppositions (cont.)

- The house “filled with the fragrance” and the “House of God” (Temple) loosing its aroma.
- Mary’s gratuitous and uncalculating gift and Judas’ narrow calculations.
- The poor as objects of our charity and the poor as those who are with us and among us.



Lent 5

We will employ Eugene Lowry's "loop" as our sermon plot. The oppositions will propel the story.

Conflict: Odd time and place for a banquet. (Jesus' enemies have already attempted to kill him. And Lazarus becomes a "living symbol" of Jesus' life-giving power. So why is he still up here so close to Jerusalem. And what is Martha doing presiding at this Eucharist?)

Lent 5

- **Complication:** The prodigal act of Mary— spilling this treasure of scent on Jesus’ feet along with her shameful act of wiping his feet with her hair claims all attention. The whole house is filled with the aroma. The entire assembly is captivated by her action,....except Judas. “Why was this perfume not sold...,” he begins. And at this point, thief or not, we tend to agree with Judas. (Concrete analogies)

Lent 5

- **Sudden Shift:** Jesus replies, “Leave her alone!” Meaning, the aroma will abide throughout the house, and Martha will continue to preside at the Holy Meal, and life and death will continue to get all mixed up and out of sequence. So this is an anointing before the Lord’s burial, at a Eucharistic feast for Lazarus who was dead and now lives.
(Can we possibly preach this text in the absence of its culmination in the Eucharist?)

Lent 5

- **Unfolding:** So here we are, gathered at Table with our risen Lord, his wounds “yet visible above.” And we check to see if all the characters are present at the Holy Meal. Yes, we have our Martha’s, they still serve. And Jesus remains the source of our life and summit of our adoration. And there is probably that abiding tension within our community between the gestures of selfless extravagance and calculating charity.

Lent 5

And what about the poor? They should be here to! (We always have them with us, among us.)

And what's that we smell?

