

Preaching During Lent

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As many of you are keenly aware as faithful Christians, the difference between a sermon and a homily is a matter of length. Whether we call it a sermon or homily, the homiletical task is to proclaim the Good News of God, particularly through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. God is to be the subject of our preaching, and we, as humankind—in all our diversity and brokenness—are the objects of divine action.

As such, preaching calls all of us to an accounting of our failure to do God's will or obey his commandments, and our traditional response is to cry *Kyrie eleison!* (Lord, have mercy!) But the righteousness demanded of God is not the end of the sin, and so, we cry *Christie eleison* (Christ, have mercy!) in a joy filled response. Through the cross, God frees the hearer to live within the community of the forgiven who, however imperfectly, seek to model by God's empowerment Jesus' example of love for the Father and for one's neighbor. Again, for God's spirited action, we respond, *Kyrie eleison*. Thus, proclaiming God's gracious and merciful action for us mere mortals is the first task in preaching, whether it is a sermon or a homily.

Interestingly, I've noticed a subtle change in recent years in some of the church bulletin designations that frequently cross my desk in the form of other church newsletters that are sent to me from other Christian groups across the nation. I've noticed that some church bulletins have renamed the sermon or homily as the Sunday "message." As I've both read and listened to these "messages", along with others that still use the terms sermon and homily, I increasingly hear exhortations accenting that we human beings are the subject, our action is the predicate, and God, neighbor, and even I become the object sentences. Whether it is a series on being a good parent or grandparent, a faithful spouse, or one who is crusading for a social cause, these "messages" sound more like 12-step self-help prescriptions than a proclamation of the Gospel.

They remind me of my early days as a student preacher serving a local church while attending Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. I'd read over the biblical texts, and more often than not focus on the exhortations of the Epistle, or for the cry for justice of the prophet while giving little attention to the God who had and still is acting in our 21st-century world. Instead of the liberating word, such messages, however well intentioned, (as I quickly learned) failed to convey a message of hope or instill a sense of trust in God who so loved the world that he gave his only Son to die for us.

My dear fellow believers, as you and I mark this year's sojourn through the Lenten in this Spring of 2022A.D., I pray that our paschal celebration of the mysteries of God's love in Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection will be filled by way of my (your) proclamation of the Good News of God's action so that hearers can feel free to respond, *Lord, have mercy!* Moreover, with the angel, who, in the final act of Jesus' sojourn through the valley of death at the empty tomb, let us boldly declare God's divine action: "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised" (Mark 16:6). Indeed, let us in our preaching join with Mary Magdalene, the first witness to the resurrection, and joyfully voice along with her, who in John 20:18 said, "I have seen the Lord!" May our proclamation above all proclaim the grace and mercy of our God who raised our dead brother Jesus to new life, and in so doing, offers us life and hope.

Thus, my dear family of faith, our cry throughout our journey in the Lenten Season should be *Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Lord, have mercy.*

Amen.