-1-

THE THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE SERMON

Many elements go into the making of a sermon. No less than poets and painters we preachers must be willing to submit ourselves to the exacting discipline of an artistic form. We cannot preach without devoting attention to such matters as language, structure, design, imagery, and delivery. The fact that the sermon relies ultimately upon the power of the Holy Spirit for its vitality does not relieve us in our preaching from penultimate responsibility for careful craftsmanship. But along with this attention to the sermon as sermon, it is essential that we develop equal skill in discerning the theological realities which undergird our own work. I am persuaded that whatever other elements contribute to the making of a sermon, there is a certain theological substructure which is indispensable.

THEOLOGY AND THE SERMON

Systematic theologians, especially those in the Barthian tradition, have taken pains to define carefully the relationship between their vocation and that of the preacher. They see theology and preaching existing in a symbiotic relationship. Theology, on its side, has no reason to exist except to serve the church in its task of proclaiming the Gospel. The past proclamation of the church provides material upon which the theologian reflects. The future proclamation of

the church is the object of the theologian's concern. Out of systematic investigation of the Word which the church has already proclaimed the theologian struggles to articulate norms for preaching still to be done. Thus theologians will often confront preachers in the role of critic. They must hold preachers accountable for the Word they presume to utter from the pulpit: Have you been faithful to the tradition of which Scripture is the primary witness? Have the words of your sermon given expression to that unique Word of which you as preacher are the servant, or have they merely been echoes of voices from your own psyche or the surrounding culture? By raising such questions, theology serves as "the conscience of preaching."[1]

It is fatal, however, if we lay the whole burden of theological reflection about our preaching upon the shoulders of the professional theologian. Preachers who demur that they are "not theologians" cannot, by that disclaimer, absolve themselves of responsibility for the theological content of the Sunday sermon. Nothing is more certain than the fact that *some* theology will surface in every sermon. The danger is that it will do so without prior reflection, uncorrected by the great tradition in which all of us preachers stand and of which we are in some sense "guardians." Unintended "theologies" will begin to dominate our preaching and to distort or even subvert the distinctive Word we are called to proclaim. When we take time to subject our past preaching to theological analysis, we may be astounded to discover that we have been purveying such strange doctrines as the perfectibility of man and society in history, the immortality of the soul, or the demand to justify oneself before God by moral or spiritual achievement.

TWO THEOLOGICAL SCHEMA

Two contemporary writers in the field of homiletics have provided preachers with particularly useful schematizations which can serve as a framework for theological reflection on our task. The first, by Kyle Haselden, is inductive in nature, taking its cues from the examination of a large body of

sermonic material. The second, by Heinrich Ott, is deductive, starting from one of the major confessional documents of the Protestant tradition.

Kyle Haselden claims that his analysis of sermons from the whole range of the history of Christian preaching reveals three indispensable elements in what he characterizes as "the good sermon . . . the biblical sermon." These elements are: (1) a description of and warning about "man's peril," (2) an announcement of "God's promise" standing over against our threatened situation, and (3) the proclamation of "God's act" in Christ which gives effect to the promise.[2] The preacher should pose to himself two questions as he seeks to determine the theological integrity of any sermon: "Does the sermon warn man of the danger in which sin and mortality submerge his whole being? Does the sermon hold out to such a man the promise of God's redeeming and resurrecting love?"[3] In short, a trinity of peril-promise-agent should reach expression in every Christian sermon.

Haselden further declares that this threefold scheme reflects a pattern present in great imaginative works of literature. "His thesis is confirmed if you overlay his scheme upon a novel like Camus' *The Plague*: The peril is the bubonic plague which is laying waste a city in North Africa. The promise is the availability of a limited supply of medicine and the hope that the disease will run its course before the city is decimated. The agent is Dr. Rieux, a courageous physician who against all odds stays at his post ministering to the stricken populace.

It should be observed, however, that in much contemporary literature the third element in Haselden's trinity is missing. In Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot,* for example, the peril is the meaninglessness, emptiness, and mutual hostility which threaten to engulf two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon. The promise is an ambiguous announcement that a mysterious figure named Godot is coming to deliver them. The play ends, however, with Godot nowhere in sight and without even the assurance that he actually exists.

But it is precisely the coming of the redemptive Agent

that lies at the center of the Christian drama. The announcement of Jesus' entrance upon the stage of our history and his death and resurrection there certify to us the promise that we are not abandoned in our peril. This is the essence of the Word we are called to preach, and Haselden's analysis is a vivid way of holding it before us. Furthermore, since the Gospel is more accurately described as story or drama than as dogma or doctrine his schematization is appropriately dynamic in its quality. It is suggestive not only of the content a Christian sermon should hold but also of the form in which it should be cast. A sermon should have more of the marks of a narrative than of an essay.[4]

The second analysis of the theological substructure of the sermon is by Heinrich Ott. His starting point is the Heidelberg Catechism which in its three main parts touches upon: (1) man's "sin and wretchedness," (2) the "redemption" wrought on our behalf by God through Christ, and (3) the obligations of gratitude which God's redeeming act lays upon us.

These three elements, Ott maintains, correspond to the "structural phases" of the life of faith. In the first phase we are brought to the realization that our situation before God is one of "lostness." Then through the Word of Jesus' redemptive work we experience, in the midst of our lost situation, an emancipating encounter with God. Finally, out of this encounter there issues a radical reorientation of our life toward new ends.

Ott insists that each of these "structural phases" of the life of faith is to have a parallel element in the sermon. On the one side, the sermon must speak realistically and convincingly about our human predicament. On the other side, it must speak concretely about the quality of life to which those claimed by God's grace are obligated. But in the center, forming the theological heartbeat of all preaching, there must be the clear and joyous announcement that in Jesus Christ God has come to us for our help.

Actual sermons will not follow this scheme in any wooden

way. The balance among the three elements will be conditioned by the biblical text and by the actualities of the particular preaching situation. The order of the points will be rearranged and will interpenetrate each other; nevertheless,

> . . . in principle the sermon as a whole has just these three things to say. Its centre lies in the middle point, in the proclamation of God's action. But in order to be intelligible and effective, this proclamation needs the other two parts, the disclosure of the true situation and the emphasis on the resulting obligation.[5]

LAW AND GOSPEL

Clearly, both Haselden and Ott are rooted in the classic theology of the Reformation. Ott calls attention to this fact by allowing the Heidelberg Catechism to provide the source material from which he constructs the theology by which the contemporary sermon should be informed. While Haselden is not so explicit in identifying his heritage, there is no mistaking the congruence of his peril-promise-agent scheme with the familiar Reformation categories of Law and Gospel. His insistence that preaching must sound the alarm to people trapped in a situation of radical threat is nothing other than the Reformers' conviction that God's Law must be proclaimed with all its power to convict persons of sin. His equal insistence that preaching must announce a Word of promise, of which Jesus is God's Agent, is only another way of stating the Reformers' recovery of the truth of God's justifying grace offered to sinners in Jesus Christ.

It is to be noted that Ott's third point, that preaching should hold before its hearers the obligations of gratitude for God's act of grace, reveals his rootage in the Reformed wing of the sixteenth-century Reformation. This formulation raises the complex question of the "third use of the Law," to which we will have occasion to return later. Put briefly, those who stand in the Lutheran tradition have generally defined the role of the Law in terms of "accuser,"

acting prior to justification, while those in the Calvinist lineage have seen the Law additionally in the role of "guide," directing our life following justification.

For Luther especially, the categories of Law and Gospel were theologically central and decisive. A portion of the following chapters will be devoted to an examination of each of these categories in his thought as they relate to the task of preaching. Here, to provide a context for that discussion, it will be useful to review briefly his doctrine of the twofold form of the Word of God.

THE TWOFOLD FORM OF THE WORD OF GOD

It is clear that the resurgent "Word of God" theologies of the twentieth century have their most direct roots in Luther. At the center of his thought stands the God who addresses us with his Word. God is the One who again and again breaks the silence of eternity and speaks to us. In fact, Luther's whole theology has been characterized as a "theology of the Word of God."[6]

This concentration upon "the God who speaks" is the correlate of Luther's insistence that we have no direct access to the mystery of God's essential being, that is, to "the absolute God." God in himself is infinitely beyond our reach. In fact, the "unclothed God" would overwhelm and destroy us in the awesomeness of his glory. We must rather lay hold of the God who comes to us "not naked but clothed and revealed in his Word."[7]

But just as we cannot know God in his essential being, neither can we know him in his primal unity. The revealing Word addresses us in twofold form—stereophonically, one might say, rather than monophonically. God speaks as both the God of wrath and the God of mercy, and so sharp is the tension between these two roles that he often seems to be two gods rather than the one God. Yet it is indeed one God who addresses us, exercising through wrath and judgment his "alien work" and through grace and forgiveness his

"proper work." It is by his Word as Law that God executes his "alien work" and by his Word as Gospel that he accomplishes his "proper work."

In his early writings Luther followed the scholastics in distinguishing between the "old law" of the Old Testament and the "new law" (Gospel) of the New Testament. Later, however, he draws the dividing line not between the two testaments but between two radically different modes of God's Word to us. Each can be heard in *both* testaments. In fact, the same text can function as both Law and Gospel. The First Commandment, for example, can condemn us for our idolatries, but in its clear affirmation of God's sovereignty it can also provide a secure foundation for our trust.[8]

It is not in Scripture but in preaching that the distinction between Law and Gospel becomes most crucially important. For all his praise of Scripture, Luther never tires in declaring the primacy of the Word preached from a human mouth to a living congregation. The church is a "mouth house" rather than a "pen house,"[9] even as the New Testament Gospel was preached before it was written down. As a summons for persons to repent and believe, the Word's natural and proper form is spoken. The oral proclamation of the sermon is the means by which God addresses persons in the present moment with both his Word of judgment and his Word of grace.

This is why preachers must be adept at distinguishing between Law and Gospel. It is through their living voices that God addresses his people either to afflict or to comfort, and it is a great art to know which form of the Word is needed and how it is to be spoken. Any confusion of the two forms results in the collapse of both. If the Law is robbed of its power to expose our utter bankruptcy before God, then our predicament is not extreme and the Word of grace is unnecessary. If, on the other hand, the Gospel is presented as in any sense a new demand laid upon us, then our situation is indeed hopeless for there remains no other Word to release us from our already impossible burden. The first

error leads people into the false security of self-righteousness; the second plunges them into the abyss of despair. Either way, the result is detrimental to the possibility of a right relationship with God in which his grace and our faith live in dynamic interaction.

Yet Luther had no illusion that to distinguish between Law and Gospel is an easy task. Separable in terms of theological analysis, they are nevertheless very closely joined in experience.[10] They lie interlaced with each other in the same human heart, for the Christian is always at the same time "sinner and justified." Therefore, we never hear the promise of the Gospel without, insofar as we are still "in the flesh," hearing also the rumbling threats of the Law. Nor do we hear the threats of the Law without, insofar as we are also "in the Spirit," rejoicing in the promise of forgiveness announced to us in the Gospel. This human difficulty in separating experientially what can be readily divided theologically led Luther to conclude:

> There's no man living on earth who knows how to distinguish between the Law and the Gospel. We may think we understand it when we're listening to a sermon, but we're far from it. Only the Holy Spirit knows this. Even the man Christ was so wanting in understanding when he was in the vineyard that an angel had to console him. . . . Because I've been writing so long about it, you'd think I'd know the distinction, but when the crisis comes I recognize very well that I am far, far from understanding. So God alone should and must be our holy master.[11]

NOTES

1. Heinrich Ott, *Theology and Preaching* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), p. 22.
2. Kyle Haselden, *The Urgency of Preaching* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 42.
3. Ibid., p. 55.
4. For a stimulating discussion of the story or parabolic nature of the Christian message see Sallie McFague TeSelle, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

5. Ott, *Theology and Preaching*, p. 53.
6. Jaroslav Pelikan, "Luther the Expositor," in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Press; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955–), 30a:48 (hereafter cited as *LW*).
7. Martin Luther, "Commentary on Psalm 45" (1533–1534), *LW* 12:312.
8. Pelikan, "Luther the Expositor," *LW* 30a:66.
9. Martin Luther, "Church Postil" (1522), quoted in Regin Prenter, "Luther on Word and Sacrament," in *More About Luther* (Decorah, Iowa: Luther College Press, 1958), p. 73.
10. Luther contends that human nature is such that, in actual experience, "the Gospel is a rare guest but the Law a constant guest" in the conscience (Martin Luther, "Lectures on Galatians" [1535], *LW* 26:117).
11. Martin Luther, "Table Talk" (1531), *LW* 54:127.

-6-

LAW AND GOSPEL IN THE SERMON

Our analysis of the theological dimensions of the sermon has involved a risk: The categories of Law, Gospel, and the call to obedience, though in reality interdependent, may come to be viewed as having a relative independence of each other. They may begin to look like discrete components which need only to be inserted into the sermon at the proper place.

The risk of such a distorted view has been taken only because analysis must often arbitrarily separate elements which in reality are inseparable. Such interrelatedness pertains especially when the reality under consideration has a dynamic life of its own. This is the case with the sermon. The Word in the form of proclamation has a mysterious vitality which does not tolerate fine, sharp-boundaried differentiation of the elements of which it consists. Categories like those with which we have been dealing will always be exhibited far more precisely in a theological essay than in the actuality of preaching.

It would be a mistake, therefore, to conclude that mastery of a schematic analysis of the theological dimensions of the sermon will lead inevitably and directly to right proclamation of Law and Gospel. This might be so if a sermon were analogous, for example, to a clock. Then the proper component could be placed in the proper position in the mech-

anism and the clock would "go." But a sermon is not a mechanism. It is a living entity whose genesis and growth are analogous to the wondrous process by which life is conceived and then develops in the womb. The sermon's creation cannot be programmed. It is not simply a total of interchangeable parts. The dimensions of Law, Gospel, and the call to obedience move within each sermon in lively, unpredictable ways. The form of each and the shape of the whole will be as unique in every event of proclamation as with each new appearance of human life. The preacher will often be as surprised and mystified by the "being" of a sermon as is a mother when she gazes at the startling individuality of her child.

Another way of stating this point is to say that, for preaching, the conjunction in the formula "Law and Gospel" is as important as the nouns. In living proclamation we are always concerned about Law *and* Gospel. These categories live within the sermon in a dialectical relationship manifesting the same dynamic interchange as inhaling and exhaling or the coursing of blood outward from the heart through the arteries and its return through the veins. Law and Gospel are the *yin* and *yang* of the life of the Word.

THREE LIVING REALITIES IN SERMON PREPARATION

Reflection on what we do when we prepare a sermon suggests that the process is an interplay of three living realities—the Word, the congregation, and the preacher. Perhaps better, the preacher provides the living matrix in which the other two realities meet in highly volatile interchange. The preacher both hosts that interchange and conditions it. Each sermon with its particular Law/Gospel configuration is a fourth living reality generated by the other three.

The Word of Scripture

Among these realities the Word must be first both in position and in authority. Of the sermon too it must be said,

"In the beginning was the Word. . . ." Preaching which is not rooted in and nourished by Scripture—what Barth calls "the second form of the Word of God"—is, in terms of the central tradition of the church, deviant. It is assumed therefore that the preparation of the sermon will begin with serious attentiveness to a text.

As preachers we will actively "listen" for many things in the text—its form, its linguistic structure, its referents to a history outside itself—but we will listen for nothing more intently than for the dominant accent with which it speaks, whether of Law or Gospel. Does this text utter a judgment which throws our life and that of our culture under radical question? Does it evoke some poignant aspect of our alienated humanity—loneliness, anxiety, hopelessness? Does it resound with some liberating word of affirmation and promise? Does it lay upon us some inexorable demand growing out of God's own unconditional and indescribable generosity? Some texts will bid us answer "Yes" to all of those questions. Others will speak more loudly with only one accent. As preachers we will pray for sensitivity to hear the characteristic Word of each text, and for integrity and skill to allow that Word to dominate the sermon we preach.

Such attentive listening will save us from imposing our own predisposition upon the text. My experience and observation teach me that our almost unalterable bias is for Law at the expense of Gospel. I know first hand that it is possible for a preacher to distort the luminous promises of the Beatitudes into a crushing burden of demand that people be meek, righteous, and peaceable. I have also heard a sermon transmute the Johannine story of Jesus' free, prevenient, life-giving action upon Lazarus into a stern requirement that *we* remove the "stones" of doubt and disobedience that keep us enclosed in our world of death!

Even when a text seems to be in itself wholly Law or Gospel, the actual sermon will not be without its counter dimension. For one thing, the total biblical witness is the wider context of each individual lection and cannot be

ignored when we preach. Furthermore, we cannot make the Gospel credible in our preaching without at least some indication of our awareness of those aspects of the human situation to which it speaks. And surely no preacher whose mandate springs directly from the Good News of Jesus' death and resurrection will proclaim what appears to be a text's total Word of judgment or demand without letting God's "No" against our human way be heard in dialectical relationship with the still more powerful "Yes" of his grace. In short, while respecting the dominating Word of the text, our homiletical articulation of that Word will reflect the fact that Law and Gospel are the twofold form of the one Word spoken by the one God and Father of all. Whatever their balance in a particular sermon, both Law and Gospel will, almost without exception, be present.

The Congregation

The other living reality which affects the relational stresses among the theological dimensions of a particular sermon is the congregation in its concrete situation. A sermon is never an abstraction prepared for a nameless, faceless audience. A sermon is a historical event; that is, it occurs in a particular setting in time and space and can be divorced from that setting only at the cost of a loss in reality. For sermons, as for other living organisms, uprooting is perilous. This is why a printed sermon read by someone who is a stranger to the original preaching situation loses the force of the firsthand event of proclamation. There is no substitute for a living preacher among living hearers.

This historical setting of the actual congregation conditions many aspects of the sermon—vocabulary, illustration, design, and not least the handling of Law, Gospel, and the call to obedience. Notice that the verb used in the preceding sentence is "conditions" and not "determines." Only the Word in the text is in a determinative position with respect to the fundamental message of the sermon. Yet, just as the Word in the form of the Incarnate One did not disregard the

realities of a given historical time and place, so the Word in preaching will be responsive to the actual configurations of life within the congregation. Such factors as the socioeconomic situation of the congregation, the political realities impinging upon the people at a particular time, or public events in which they are caught up will condition the way Law and Gospel themes sound in a particular sermon.

If, for example, the sermon text is Isaiah 40 with its powerful call to "Comfort, comfort" the people, the sermon surely will emerge differently in a congregation of the dispossessed in the ghetto than in a congregation of the affluent in the suburbs. In the first instance, the identification between the listeners—alienated from the "good life" of society and oppressed by its structures—and the exiles in Babylon will be immediate and direct. The preacher will need to exert only limited effort in establishing the need of his people for "comfort." The Law will be preached as a description of their existence, a gentle reminder of "man's being as it in fact is." The burden of the sermon will be to proclaim the graciousness of the God who does not forget his people in affliction but works in history for their deliverance.

In a congregation of the affluent, who are themselves part of the structures of oppression, the same approach would be impossible. At one level, the very security of the people obscures a sense of need and makes the proclamation of "comfort to the afflicted" meaningless. Homiletical stress in such a situation may need to fall much more heavily upon the later word in this passage which undercuts the reliability of all earthly securities: "All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field" (Isa. 40:6). Yet preachers of the Gospel will not allow such necessary judgment to obliterate the Word of God's promise which reaches out to our people without exception. We will be aware of the fact that loneliness and despair are not phenomena to be found only among the poor and oppressed of the earth but that they take their own poignant form even among those who may appear to have cause only to rejoice.

The Preacher

Finally, we must turn to the third living reality—the host of the dynamic interchange between text and context, pericope and people. It is from within our consciousness as preachers that the sermon is generated. In our own being we provide the womb for the birth of a new form of the Word of God.

To think of each Sunday's sermon in just this way heightens the awe and expectation with which we enter upon our weekly task. There will be awe, because nothing less than God's Word for the present moment will be struggling for life in and through our words. There will be expectation, because none other than the Holy Spirit is at work in the process out of which a sermon is born.

It would not be sacrilegious for us when we begin our preparation for preaching to offer the prayer of Mary in response to the Annunciation: "Behold, I am the [servant] of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). An analogous and mysterious appropriation of the human by the divine is present in the creation of a sermon. Preaching, in short, is in some sense "incarnational." The Word makes use of our "flesh"—limited, flawed, vulnerable as it is—to engage humanity in the present hour.

To speak of preaching as "incarnational" is not to deify or spiritualize it but rather to underscore its humanity. The sermon does not inhabit that eternal, ineffable realm where God dwells in unapproachable glory and where his Word is present in undivided unity. The sermon is an event in history where the Word of God resounds in the dialectic of Law and Gospel. When we preach, we speak the Word in this twofold form. It is for this reason that we must cultivate the capacity to reflect on the theological motifs which reach expression in our sermons.

To stress the "incarnational" nature of preaching suggests also that as preachers we are far more than inert hosts of the interchange between the two realities of text and congrega-

tion. As noted earlier, we condition as well as host that interchange. God willingly takes the risk of placing the treasure of his Word in "earthen vessels" (2 Cor. 4:7). Though we pray that the Word may have "free course" in our proclamation, for better or for worse that Word is always subject to the partialness of our understanding, the limitations of our knowledge, the biases of our attitudes, and the resistance and rebelliousness of our egos. Every time we preach, the Word must triumph over us as well as employ us.

This fact makes our preparation for preaching as much a battle scene as a birth process. Strife as well as labor is present. I once heard our weekly encounter with the Word compared with Jacob's midnight wrestling match against his terrifying adversary at the brook Jabbok. The analogy is not overdrawn. Each week our calling to preach plunges us into the pit with the Word of God. Of necessity we are laid open to engagement with the Word as Law and Gospel. The outcome may be no more clear for us than it was for Jacob. We will carry away psychic marks of our struggles analogous to his crippled thigh. So far as I can see, this weekly duty to wrestle with the Word as we prepare to preach is the only possible advantage we clergy have over the laity of the church. Unless we only feign engagement, we cannot escape that regular exposure to Law and Gospel in which we are both wounded and healed.

What I am struggling to communicate is the fact that our preparation to preach is itself the process by which Law and Gospel become more than abstract theological principles. Our places of study become arenas in which we ourselves are grasped by those categories as by living hands. Here we are seized by a knowledge that there is no escaping, namely, that our failures in love and our disloyalties to truth are as profound and pervasive as those of any person to whom we preach. Here is stripped away the superficial covering beneath which we usually manage to hide the loneliness, the emptiness, the anxiousness, and the instabilities which gnaw at the core of our lives. Here the Word of our free and unconditional acceptance, which nothing but our inveterate

pride can keep us from hearing, is spoken again and again. Here we are drawn into relationship with that imperishable Reality which is the true center underlying and renewing the constantly threatened center of our own being. Here we are beckoned toward patterns of self-discipline and self-giving which, left to ourselves, we would summarily reject even if they were to occur to us. Thus, in our preparation to preach, Law and Gospel move from being categories by which we think to becoming realities out of which we live. If this does not happen to us during the hours of preparation, it is unlikely that it will happen to our people during the minutes of our proclamation.

A JOURNAL OF TWO ENCOUNTERS

It may be that the dialectic I have been attempting to describe throughout this book, but especially in this closing chapter, will be served best by concrete example. I invite you, therefore, to come with me into the arena and join me vicariously in my encounter with the Word of God as it struggled for expression in two preaching texts. I will try as best I can to recover something of the process by which the themes of Law, Gospel, and call to obedience took shape for me in two actual sermons. As my companion and critic you will have to judge whether the decisions made along the way were faithful to the text and appropriate to the preaching context.

As to context, the first of the two sermons was prepared for preaching in what is now my most regular congregation—a seminary community. The occasion was a eucharistic service during the first week in Advent. The second sermon was prepared for a more typical local congregation and grew out of an exegetical study I was doing at the time on Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer.

Encounter I

Actually, I found myself engaged with three texts as I prepared for the Advent preaching assignment. The first two—

Isaiah 63:16–17; 64:1–8 and I Corinthians 1:3–9—were appointed by a lectionary. The third—Mark 11:1–10—was selected because it relates an event traditionally held before the church as Advent begins. The Isaiah text begins with one of the few affirmations of God as "Father" in the Old Testament. It then moves on to the heart-wrenching plea of a disillusioned people for God to "rend the heavens and come down" as he had in ancient times for their deliverance. The passage from I Corinthians contains Paul's thanksgiving for God's spiritual gifts poured out upon the troublesome congregation in Corinth and his assurance to them that "God is faithful." The Markan text is that gospel's version of the Palm Sunday entrance into Jerusalem.

An initial reading of these lessons began to establish the Isaiah passage in my mind as the primary preaching text. This may have been in part because Advent is for me a season in which Old Testament texts speak with special power. It is a season of longing and expectation, of hope yet to be fulfilled. The prophets, with their polarities of dismay about the present and confidence for the future, are the preeminent spokesmen of this Advent mood. They remind us in the church that, though we live in the light of Jesus' death and resurrection there is always a "not yet" about our life in history. Texts such as this passage from Isaiah can prevent us from making the unwarranted leap into supposed eschatological fulfillment about which Bonhoeffer warned: "In my opinion it is not Christian to want to take our thoughts and feelings too quickly and too directly from the New Testament."[1]

With the decision made to preach primarily on the Isaiah text, I began exegetical study of this passage. I was reminded that the voice we hear in these verses is that of "Third Isaiah" speaking to those who had returned from exile in Babylon. But the return, desired for so many years and promised so eloquently by "Second Isaiah," had not brought fulfillment. "Third Isaiah" prophesied in what could be described as the "dog days" of Israel's history. Though many

years had passed since the return, Jerusalem was still a desolation and the temple rubble. People were saying out loud that the lush gardens they knew in Babylon were to be preferred to the dusty waste which now surrounded them. It is clear then that the prophet is speaking for a people who felt trapped in a dreary, disillusioned time. "O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down and make the heavens tremble before thee" is part prayer and part cry of despair.

It was here that the text suddenly began to lay hold of me. I found the prophet speaking for me as much as for Israel. His cry echoed voices I had heard sounding in my own consciousness and from the consciousness of my contemporaries. To put it in the categories we have been using, the Word in this text began to speak powerfully for me as Law under the aspect of the "mirror of existence." Life as it is—not as I would like it to be—was being reflected back to me.

What I saw in the mirror of this text was existence cast in the image of the trap or the dead end. The text forced me to reflect upon those times when in personal affairs or in the larger dynamics of our society circumstances so close in upon us that all visible openings into the future are blocked. God remains silent. All the promises on which we had counted appear to have been voided. The only prospect is "tomorrow, tomorrow, and tomorrow" in unchanging defeat.

And yet in a strange way this bleak, "Lawish" mood began already to function for me as Gospel. At one level, the very fact that these words from an ancient prophet were speaking *for* me as well as *to* me broke into my isolation. Others, it was clear, had known the bitter taste of despair, and by giving it open expression before God had become my companions in the trap-like conditions of my own life and time. Indeed it was as though God were affirming my right not to hide from the potentially most destructive realities in and around my existence. To know despair was not to be wrong but to be human.

At another level, the anguished cry of the prophet that God

might "rend the heavens and come down" began to make itself heard as the voice of unextinguishable "hope against hope." Born from despair, it spoke nevertheless of faith. Here was the paradox of our human hearts pleading with the God whom we feel at the same moment to be deaf to our prayers. To the God who seems to be either indifferent or impotent we continue to cry out our own versions of Isaiah's prayer: "Act, God, act! Not just in history in general, not just in history past—but in *our* history, *now!*"

Thus a text which helped expose "the dark underside" of our existence, functioning thereby as a word of Law, already began to speak with liberating accents by inviting me into solidarity with all who know what it is to be caught in circumstances over which they have lost control. One preaching goal with respect to this text, therefore, became that of evoking from my listeners a similar recognition of the currents of hopelessness which ran through their own responses to life.

Important as this aspect of the text was in opening a way into the human situation to be addressed, it actually provided only the minor theme of the sermon, and in terms of quantity of material only a brief segment. Far more important for the message to be preached were the voices of hope which kept weaving in and out of Isaiah's lamentations:

> . . . thou, O Lord art our Father,
> our Redeemer from of old is thy name. (63:16)
>
> When thou didst terrible things
> which we looked not for,
> thou camest down,
> the mountains quaked at thy presence. (64:3)
>
> Yet, O Lord, thou art our Father;
> we are the clay, and thou art the potter;
> we are all the work of thy hand. (64:8)

Here the desperate yearnings voiced in 64:1 are answered by ringing assurances that God has not abandoned his people. He is the one who *has* "come down" and accomplished

on behalf of his chosen people such "terrible things" that even the mountains shudder before him. Such a God can be counted on to act in the present and in the future.

But the questions which forced themselves urgently upon me were "How?" and "Where?" The references in 64:3 were probably to the thunderings and lightnings which accompanied God's epiphany to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Such imagery, however, is not apt to carry much meaning for a contemporary congregation. We are not apt to look to upheavals in nature for the signs of God's intervention in our affairs. Yet both this text and the motifs of the Advent season were generating for me a sense of anticipation that God does and will act for our good, a hope that he is neither locked up in ancient centuries nor sealed off somewhere in "the heavens." The traditional Advent collect, "Stir up, we beseech thee, thy power, O Lord, and come" is one which the church prays with confidence—that again in our own times and circumstances he *will* come. How then to articulate this Gospel word of hope in a way that would give it some chance of being heard? This became the major problem with which I had to struggle.

It was at this point that the texts from Mark's gospel and the letter to the Corinthians gave me help. Especially read in juxtaposition with Isaiah's word about a God who does such "terrible things" that the mountains quake, the Markan account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was instructive. Here is a record of God acting in history for our good. This is what it looks like, the evangelist seems to be saying, when God comes to his people to open a way for them. Our King comes as a peasant riding a donkey. Actually, the whole scene appears to be written as a deliberate parody of all invasions of cities that have ever been—a carpet of cast-off clothing instead of bombs, the singing of children rather than the thunder of artillery, palm fronds instead of bayonets. The episode began to emerge for me as having an almost ludicrous quality. I sensed the legitimacy of modern portrayals of Jesus as a clown—the court jester of the kingdom

of heaven who pokes holes in all earthly pretensions of power.

Though this perspective obviously brings with it an element of judgment upon our society's obsession with bigness and force, the Palm Sunday story came home to me chiefly as a clue to where to look for God's interventions in history. It suggested to me that our understanding of Isaiah's word "terrible" needed revising. I began to see that what ultimately has power in the world isn't force that can be measured in megatons, or authority which sits in high places, but rather realities which in our human eyes are apt to seem utterly impotent, absolutely vulnerable, and ludicrously insignificant.

Here the stories surrounding the nativity which the church reads at the end of the Advent season reenforced Mark's account of Palm Sunday. What could be more impotent, vulnerable, and apparently insignificant than a baby? And yet the first reverberations of the hidden power at the heart of such apparent powerlessness can be seen in Matthew's story of Herod's panicked slaughter of the infants of Bethlehem. Thus in a way Isaiah could not have foreseen it is true that "when thou didst terrible things that we did not look for [like assuming the vulnerability of infant flesh and blood], the mountains shuddered before thee." In this babe in a manger, this peasant on a donkey, this dead man on a cross was hidden the power which has been able to shake the nations and shape history.

This clue as to the strange places where we should look for God's intervening activity led me to reflect upon some of the unlikely forms in which he comes to us today. Here the text from 1 Corinthians was helpful. As I reread it in the light of the insight gained from the Markan lesson, what Paul was saying struck me as absolutely astonishing. He was expressing joyous thanksgiving for the "grace of God" which had poured out such a plenitude of spiritual gifts upon the Corinthian church. *This* to a congregation he is about to blast with charges of divisiveness, outrageous immorality,

and assorted other violations of all that the Gospel means! Yet Paul is sure that in this motley, unfaithful, unlikely collection of people the Spirit is busy, because as he puts it "God is faithful." Here again is the promise disclosed in the Palm Sunday narrative, that God chooses for his points of entry into the world those persons, groups, and events which from the human perspective are apt to seem most unlikely.

For me this was a shining word of Gospel. It assured me that God does not require superior material or promising circumstances to accomplish his purposes. I heard in a new way the meaning of Isaiah's familiar words, "We are the clay, and thou art the potter" (64:8). God is able to take up the most ordinary and unimpressive material and shape it to his design. As Nikos Kazantzakēs once put it, if God is indeed a potter then it must follow that "he works with mud."[2] Here was an opportunity to articulate God's affirmation of us all, standing before him as we always do at some level of our lives, broken, confused, hopeless. The texts were saying to me, as I would try to say to the congregation, that God acts more often at the point of our most painful defeats than at the point of our supposed victories. All of this was brought into christological focus for me when the momentum of the texts led me to reflect upon how, on the day when above all days God rent the heavens and "came down" terrible in love, it was by way of a man who had hung powerless on a cross and had been laid lifeless in a tomb.

This "journal of an encounter" scarcely suggests the form into which the actual sermon was finally shaped for preaching. As it happens, the rhythm of thought about the texts was generally repeated in the structure of the sermon. The sermon moved basically from the preaching of Law as "mirror of existence" to a proclamation of Gospel as "antiphon to existence." The pairing of Law and Gospel in this case might be described as despair/hope or impotence/possibility. The division, however, was not neatly Point I—Law, Point

II—Gospel. As has been noted, the clarification of the human situation in the Isaiah text already began to introduce nuances of Gospel by drawing us into the community of the distressed. Likewise, the Gospel word that God intervenes most powerfully in and through the humanly powerless speaks implicitly a word of judgment against the mistaken identifications of power we usually make. In this sermon the call to obedience never came to explicit expression. That motif was not present in direct form in the texts, and as the sermon developed structurally it seemed to me that to introduce it would have meant an arbitrary intrusion on the dominating theme. Here is a case where one hopes that the liberating affirmation of the Gospel will give people new freedom to act when and where action is possible.

Encounter II

As indicated above, the second sermon whose development I will trace was prepared for a more typical congregational setting. The text for it is Matthew 6:9, the opening address of the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father who art in heaven." I had been engaged in an exegetical study of the whole prayer in Matthew's setting and, because of some of the fundamental issues raised by its opening words, decided to prepare a sermon on just that portion.

What arrested my attention was this invocation's simple affirmation of the fatherliness of God. I was suddenly struck by the difficulty—even the impossibility—of making that utterly trustful statement today. Natural and historical phenomena make it audacious, not to say absurd, to name the universe a home where we are related to God as children to a father.

Paradoxically therefore, just as the cry of despair in the Isaiah text functioned in part for me as Gospel so this beautifully clear Gospel-bearing affirmation began to function for me as Law. That is, it exposed the gnawing doubts which always accompany my verbalizations of faith. I was forced to reflect on the fact that even those of us who pray

these familiar words with great regularity often do not do so with full confidence that we are talking to or about someone real. In the age of "the absence of God," it becomes increasingly difficult for people to believe that in some cosmic sense we live in a home where we're known and cared for by an invisible, all-powerful, all-loving Father. More and more, people feel like orphans cut adrift in space.

This mood was one I recognized in my own consciousness and knew to be present for many who would be listening to me. For some this doubt, which is always the shadowy companion of faith, would be subconscious. It seemed to me that at this point it might be helpful to speak *for* my listeners, bringing into the light of day where it could be dealt with the unbelief which is a portion of our common humanity. Law would function at this stage of the sermon as "mirror of existence," but it would also, I hoped, have a cathartic effect for those in whom doubt was suppressed. Here again is an instance of a principle enunciated in Chapter 1, that Law and Gospel, though subject to separation in theological analysis, often interpenetrate each other in actual sermons, and certainly in human experience.

Why, I asked myself, is belief in the fatherliness of God such a problem for us today? I decided that beyond the problem of God itself there are at least two roots to our difficulty. The first is our radically changed conception of the universe. For Jesus and his contemporaries, living in a relatively compact three-story cosmos, the imagery of father-child did not involve quite as incredible a stretch of sensibility as for us. We must live with the knowledge of a universe in which stars and galaxies by the trillions spin through space that has no known limits. The sense of intimacy engendered by the analogical language of home and family seems utterly incongruous with the immensity of which we are such infinitesimal parts. The scope of the universe known to us today breeds within us a sense of being castaways in space, orphans in the vastness of the cosmos.

It seemed to me, however, that the second root of our

difficulty is still more serious and certainly not peculiar to our modern consciousness. The universe seems not only too large to be a home but also too cruel. The problem of suffering which plagued the author of Job and which receives no rational resolution anywhere in the biblical literature is still our chief barrier against affirming a God who knows us and cares for us like a father. How can pain continue to throb through the universe if its Creator and Ruler is also like a father who loves and cares for us as his children? *Could* not one who is so all-powerful as to be named "God" remove suffering? And *would* not one who is so all-loving as to be called "Father" will to do so? I found my reflections taking me back to Albert Camus' powerful novel, *The Plague,* in which a courageous and humane physician fighting a desperate battle to minister to a city stricken by bubonic plague declares, "Until my dying day I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to the torture."[3] That rebellious cry, it seemed to me, put into words our own most honest thoughts when confronted with inexplicable pain.

The Gospel offers no intellectual solution to these questions which rise in our hearts concerning the fatherliness of God. It rather proclaims a message which invites us to a response of faith even while our questions persist. Fundamentally, that message is the word of the cross. The reality of God's caring love is not a truth we extrapolate from the facts of nature or the general course of world history. In both nature and history there is always at least as much to contradict that reality as to affirm it. The knowledge that fathering love is the secret of the universe is a truth of revelation received only by faith, and the revelation of that love has its center point in Jesus' death and resurrection.

There needed to be in the sermon therefore some way of speaking about Jesus as the embodiment of the very prayer of faith he was teaching his disciples, some movement toward a christological statement concerning God's fatherliness. I decided it would be consistent with the developing theme of

the sermon to do this in analogical language still drawn from the realm of the family. The church has often spoken of Jesus as the "elder brother" among those who are incorporated into the family of God. I found a contemporary symbol for this ancient designation in the recollection of an article about a search conducted by an older brother for an American pilot shot down over the Vietnamese jungle. I could not remember whether the search had been successful. The important thing, however, was the fact that this older brother had been a walking, searching, suffering demonstration of the fact that the lost pilot was not abandoned. He was followed by love into the depths of the jungle. He had a home.

This, it seemed to me, offered a way of speaking about one aspect of the significance of the incarnation. Jesus is like an "elder brother," the Son come from the Father's house as a sign that we are never abandoned. He is a walking, searching, suffering demonstration of a love which follows us to the extremities of our existence and participates in our suffering. This brother man on his cross, crying out of anguish and darkness to the God who appeared to have forsaken him, is the partner of our pain. His resurrection becomes the vindication of his faith and ours. Nothing in his death and resurrection resolves the intellectual problem of suffering. He offers rather the certitude that no matter how immense the universe may seem there is a love at its heart that is vaster still. And no matter how cruel the universe may seem there is a love at its heart that takes the pain upon itself—a God who is "the Great Companion, the fellow sufferer who understands."[4]

My goal in this section of the sermon was to articulate the Gospel in a way that responded to the aspects of reality set forth in the earlier section. It should be emphasized again that this reality of our doubt-filled, pain-streaked existence was itself raised as a problem by the text's affirmation of God's fathering love. I hoped too that persistence with the imagery of familial relationships would humanize the theo-

logical points being made. It was also my intention to avoid any suggestion that suffering can be bypassed in our life in history. I tried to preserve the "in the midst of" quality which must always accompany the preaching and hearing of the promise.

In retrospect I believe I could have ended the sermon at this point. No doubt it would have been sufficient to try to speak to and for my listeners about the roots of our unbelief and to make some attempt to share with them a way in which I heard the Gospel speaking to our human condition. The result would have been a bipolar Law/Gospel sermon. At the time, however, I decided to deal with the category we have called "the call to obedience."

What led me to this step was the thought that just as Jesus in his suffering, risen humanity is the sign, planted at the center of history, of God's father-love, so the church as his body is to serve as the continuing sign of that love. It occurred to me that one way of speaking about the mission of the church and the calling of every Christian is to say that we are to help close the credibility gap which continues to make it difficult for people to believe. Christian witness really means serving the possibility that persons who no longer can will once again be able to pray, "Our Father. . . ."

These reflections led me into a brief section of the sermon in which Law as the "hammer of judgment" fell with some weight. To describe the Christian calling as I have done above is also to expose the fact that we have been deficient in its accomplishment. Indeed, we have sometimes added to the difficulties people already have in believing that this universe is in some sense a home fathered by one who knows and cares. Later petitions in the Lord's Prayer itself suggested ways in which this happens, for example, our grudging sharing of "daily bread" with the world's hungry and the vindictiveness we often manifest toward those who need our forgiveness.

My purpose, however, was not to shame people into some new forms of obedience but rather to attract them to the

prospect of literally "re-presenting" the love of God to persons now alienated from it. Again it seemed important to stay within the imagery of family life. I attempted to create for the listeners a vision of themselves as brothers and sisters within the family of God who are called to extend the bounds of their household of faith to include others. I tried to root this call in the reality of grace by referring again to what has been revealed to us by the action of Jesus, the "elder brother" of us all. Just as he has made it possible for us to pray, "Our Father . . .," so we will assist those desolate, lonely people who cry out into the immensity that surrounds them but hear nothing in return beyond the echo of their own voices. For all those now under the illusion that they are orphans in the universe, we will become "little Christs"—living signs that for them too there is a Father and a home.

NOTES

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), p. 157.
2. Nikos Kazantzakēs, *The Greek Passion* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), p. 151.
3. Albert Camus, *The Plague* (New York: Random House, 1948), pp. 196–197.
4. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1929), p. 532.