

*The Sermon
and The Propers*

VOLUME I

The Advent and Epiphany Seasons

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*Concordia Publishing House
Saint Louis, Missouri*

Introduction

THE PURPOSE of these volumes is to encourage preaching according to the Church Year and in harmony with the appointed Propers. There is ample evidence that such encouragement is needed. An increasing number of preachers disregard the ancient system of texts and subjects and follow no order or plan in presenting the truths of salvation. The Propers may still be used, but the dominant thought presented and developed is ignored. The sermon abruptly injects an element into the worship of the people that is out of harmony with the tone and spirit created by the Propers. No divine command binds the preacher to the Standard Series of Pericopes or to the thoughts and subjects presented progressively by the Propers in the course of the liturgical year. No system of pericopes is enjoined by God. Yet the need of some order and plan must be conceded if the whole counsel of God for man's salvation is to be presented. With some possible exceptions each set of Propers emphasizes a specific and definite truth, and the sermon should be in harmony with the chief thought of the day if the service is to constitute a well-rounded, purposeful whole.

Sacramental and Historical Church Year

The Church Year as we have it today is the Historical Year and the product of the Middle Ages. Eminent scholars assure us that the ancient Church had no Church Year but only seasons and cycles, an annual circle of festival and nonfestival seasons. The concept of a Church Year as an independent whole, in and by itself, is purely academic. Nevertheless, we are almost compelled to observe the Historical Year, beginning with the First Sunday in Advent, because the Lutheran Liturgy is regulated by it. The general idea of a Church Year is approached with greater understanding, however, if we do not lose sight of the Sacramental Year. It is called sacramental be-

liberty. The faithful feel the need of maintaining the relationship established through Jesus Christ, the need to approach God and to have God approach them. When God draws near to men and faithful men approach God, that is worship. If this contact with God is to be shared with others, certain forms must be agreed upon. This common work performed in the common worship of a congregation is called "Liturgy."

Is the Sermon Part of the Liturgy?

Many regard the sermon as a thing set apart, independent of, and unrelated to, the forms of worship that precede and follow it. A liturgical church can assume no other position than that liturgical preaching is part of the Liturgy. A sermon that enlarges upon and applies the chief thought presented by the Propers, including the Epistle and the Gospel, is not independent of the Liturgy. It belongs not to the preacher but to the people, as part of their worship. Angus Dun spoke well when he said: "A sermon is not primarily a man telling us what he thinks about the state of the world, what he thinks of us or our duties in life. It is not even primarily telling us what he thinks about God or Christ or charity or prayer. A sermon is a man's speaking to prepare the way of God's speaking." Like the prayer of the Church, the sermon must be corporate, the faithful must receive it and make it their own. It is an integral part of the Liturgy, and liturgy is the worship of and by the people. Rightly conceived and executed, it is worship, the people's worship, the very heart of it, for God is worshiped and glorified through His Word and Sacraments. God speaks to the assembled congregation through the sermon. But the sermon is also a part of the revelation of God within the Church. It is the response of the Church, glorifying His Name and causing Him to be known and worshiped. It is an act of corporate devotion, turning men's thoughts and hearts to Christ and through Him to the hope and striving for a better world and the assurance of life eternal. If, then, the sermon is a part of worship, it should be in harmony with the general tone of devotion struck by the Propers. A congregation that has been taught to worship intelligently is led by the Propers to direct its worship into a particular channel and should not be required suddenly to change channel and direction when the sermon begins.

How the Sermon Can Inject a Foreign Element

Without question, the message of Cantate, the Fourth Sunday after Easter, is important in the progression from the Resurrection to the Ascension and Pentecost. The Introit brings the faithful into harmony with the whole Easter message. "He hath done marvelous things! The Lord hath made known His salvation; His righteousness hath He openly showed in the sight of the heathen. His right hand, and His holy arm, hath gotten Him the victory!" The Gospel supplies the link between the Ascension and our Lord's coming again on Pentecost. "If I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you." The Epistle speaks of the Perfect and Supreme Gift promised and gives the conditions of reception and acceptance. The petition of the Collect is based on the working of the Comforter in the midst of the faithful. The unity of believers is emphasized, unity in loving the commandments, in desiring the promise, and in fixing the hearts on the true joys of Christ. The Propers create a definite and distinct atmosphere. After this preparation the faithful may rightly expect and anticipate a sermon in harmony with the spirit of the day. But this expectation is disappointed, and the direction of worship is abruptly changed when the preacher begins the sermon. For a strange observance has found its way into the calendar of many churches: Mother's Day. The Propers for the Fourth Sunday after Easter are used, but in the sermon Mother's Day is observed. Because it is Mother's Day the faithful are abruptly jarred out of the worshipful atmosphere created by the Propers and must now hurriedly adjust themselves to a totally foreign element. Or the appointed Propers are disregarded and "appropriate" texts substituted for the occasion. An inferior prayer is read in place of the Collect and a lesson from Solomon instead of the Epistle. But which of the four Evangelists offers an "appropriate" Gospel? And what about an Introit? Little wonder that the people have been led to believe that the Propers are unimportant!

The Appointed Lessons Are Not Pretexts

When preaching on the Standard Pericopes and in harmony with the Propers, it is not enough that the text of the sermon be either the whole or a part of the Epistle or the Gospel. The lessons

for the day may suggest a variety of excellent subjects, some of which may not be appropriate although suggested by one or the other pericope. The Introit for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany declares: "They shall sing to Thy Name, O Thou Most High!" The Collect addresses our Lord as the almighty and everlasting God, "who dost govern all things in heaven and earth." The Gospel tells how the humble Teacher from Nazareth manifested forth His glory by doing His first sign. The Epistle shows how the glory of the Epiphany Lord is revealed in the believer's devoted relation to his fellow men. Here is ample indication of an epiphany. Yet preachers have disregarded the Propers and the fact that our Lord's Epiphany is the sublime subject of the season. They have largely ignored the manifestation of our Lord's divine glory and emphasized a subject that is merely incidental on this day. For the fact that this Epiphany took place on the occasion of a marriage is not sufficient reason to preach on the subject of marriage. Nobody will dispute that a sermon on this subject is necessary. But why must it be preached on the Second Sunday after the Epiphany? Why should the manifestation of divine sympathy suggest a sermon on marriage?

Worship Should Reflect God

When men draw near to God and God draws near to men, it may be expected that the forms employed and the manner of worship will reflect God's qualities. The three qualities that summarize God and ought to be reflected in our worship are goodness and beauty and truth. For well-rounded worship the three ought to be emphasized equally. The Lutheran Reformation was a renewed emphasis on truth, yet the beauty of the Liturgy and of the forms was not sacrificed. Crudeness in the performance of the Liturgy and ugliness that reflects ignorance or indifference have no place in the worship of the faithful and cannot be justified or excused by the explanation, "We are not high-church, we put all emphasis on truth." Exclusive emphasis on truth may cause preaching to degenerate into a cold, intellectual formulation of dogma. To reflect God, the beauty of holiness and the goodness of sincere love for all men must be mixed in equal measure with truth. The ancient Liturgy lends itself admirably to the equal emphasis on the three divine qualities. In fact, it is intended to express all three, and it