

INTRODUCTION

THE SITUATIONAL SERMON AS OCCASIONAL PREACHING

There is a famous quote from one of the astronauts on the ill-fated moon shot of *Apollo 13*. You may recall that their space launch started like most of the others. For all anyone knew back then, *Apollo 13* would be as problem-free as *Apollo 11* and *12*. In fact, back in the early 1970s the whole space thing had almost grown ho-hum: “Here comes another moon landing.” But it was not meant to be. Although the astronauts would not understand the breadth of the situation for some time, they could tell even as they hurtled toward the moon that there had been some kind of explosion, and now their life-support gauges were off. Later they would learn that an oxygen tank had blown. For now, though, they knew from the instrument panel that something was not right. So the astronauts radioed home. “Houston,” astronaut Jim Lovell announced laconically, “we have a problem.”

Those of us called to preach the gospel in today’s church know the feeling all too well. We too frequently practice ministry as if we can program everything. We have our church calendars to tell us when the next big denominational emphasis is (along with all the glossy mailers from church headquarters), we have our lectionaries to help us plan the sweep of our preaching for months in advance, and we have our congregation’s own rhythm: budget time in the fall, congregational meeting in the winter,

and the big juridical convention in the summer. But deep down we also know that not everything can be programmed, scheduled, or planned. Paraphrasing freely Henri Nouwen, we could even say, “Ministry happens *in* the interruptions.”¹ Just when we think we have it all under control and we’re on our way, a beloved member of the church dies tragically or the church finances unravel or some big public issue hits us between the eyes. In moments like that, we can almost hear a plaintive voice announcing: “Church, we have a situation.”

Of course, sometimes the calendars, programs, and protocols do help. Denominational resources from the national church’s social justice office may just provide a way of dealing with a sticky public issue. Occasionally a lectionary text almost seems to have dropped like manna from heaven: a family dies while on vacation, and the epistle reading for the day turns out to be Romans 8:31-39. Or perhaps the juridical stewardship resources give you just the kind of focus you need to deal with that budget problem. Well, when that does happen, you’re okay. You can put this book down now.

This book, however, is written for those occasions, those *situations*, when the planets don’t align. It is written for those situational moments that require more than programs, lectionaries, and denominational emphases can provide. Please recall the poor souls on *Apollo 13*. Their oxygen tank problems were not written in the mission plan. There were no protocols for such situations in the various hardware manuals at Mission Control. What they needed was more than any calendar, plan, or scheduled reading could provide: they needed a word of direct address. A sweeping retelling of the narrative of American space travel from its humble advent at Kitty Hawk to its fiery Pentecost on the launchpad would be inspiring but insufficient for the situation. Reminders of scheduled mission procedures would have been irrelevant. In a situation like that, something more was called for. It was time to talk and think and act—together.

But what do you say when you really need to say something in a difficult situation? There are situations that the Bible, as central as it is to our life together as church, neither talks about

nor even imagines. There are also situations that are bigger than the kinds of therapeutic insights we can offer or facilitate in the best of our pastoral care. There are also situations that cannot be merely managed according to the global economic worldview we live in between the business section in the morning paper and the closing numbers for the big stock indexes during the nightly news on TV. Could it be that situations are just the place we need something more than the conventional wisdoms of therapy and management? For situations such as these, the most helpful thing is a gospel word born of theological insight.

Of course, good week-by-week lectionary preaching also requires solid theological insight.² Theology is not just an “add-on” for when we have sticky church situations. It should be part of our preaching even when we follow the recurring cycles of the lectionary. What situations do, however, is bring us to a point where a “text” or a season is no longer foregrounded. Now the “situation” is the focus.

Even then, it’s far too easy, when pressing situations emerge, to forget what the gospel is and to neglect theological reflection. Pragmatism runs deep in our culture. So when a death happens, we can get caught up too easily in the language of therapy and forget our theological task of proclaiming the gospel in the face of death. Or when a financial issue surfaces, we are tempted to turn a timely stewardship sermon into something that sounds like an infomercial for our ecclesiastical programs. Worse yet, a public crisis like 9/11 happens and we find ourselves so tongue-tied we have nothing gospel to say at all. It may be that in the face of such difficulties we revert to kind of prereflective “default theology,” pietistic platitudes, or, worst of all, no theology whatsoever.

The Starting Point: The Good News of Justification by Grace Alone through Faith Alone

The key for preachers is to become more theologically focused on what the gospel is. The “gospel” is sometimes a term bandied about without ever being defined. It can easily become a

kind of empty “cipher.” For one’s hearers, too often the term is confused with the final lection that is read according to the ecumenical order of the lectionary (as in, “The Gospel according to Luke”). Our goal here is to help you understand the gospel that you preach theologically. The gospel is something we as preachers can talk about, reflect on, and develop in our proclamation. It is, we contend, an incredible help for focusing one’s work theologically so the preacher can know what to say in the pulpit when difficult situations emerge in parish life.

In some ways the gospel does have a discernible content and form. Some have argued that there is a kind of grammar to the gospel.³ If so, then maybe many of us often seem to need remedial grammar lessons. For instance, in preaching, does the use of phrases like “we should,” “we ought,” “we must,” or even “therefore let us” really allow us to speak the gospel clearly? And as for form, if our gestures and body language are marked by anxious glares or overweening finger-wagging, are we not at least at cross purposes with the gospel we want to proclaim? Surely we can perceive on one level at least that there is something of a meaning and shape to gospel proclamation.

It would be a big mistake, however, to assume that the gospel is a kind of timeless essence standing apart from life as lived.⁴ It is not sufficient to identify the gospel with certain formulae ready to hand: the kerygma, Christ, Christ and him crucified, and so forth. The gospel is not like condensed soup, which only needs a couple cans of water to make reasonably palatable. No, when we talk about the gospel in *situations*, different elements of the gospel come to the fore and require our attention. For example, in Luther’s day, the renewal of the proclamation of the gospel happened against the backdrop of the church’s sale of papal indulgences for release from purgatory. In the process, that gospel of justification by grace through faith took a certain content and shape in connection with those contextual features (grace and works, law and gospel, etc.). A clear sense of the gospel today could not easily be reduced to a single doctrine. Yet “justification” as a *starting point* for gospel reflection could help in facing things like the tendency of global capitalism to

commodify everything and everybody or the pervasiveness of the “pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps” culture of success in North America. These are the kinds of gospel issues and situational tensions we explore in this book.

So in the following pages we will really be talking about a theology of the gospel. We will need to pay attention to enduring features of our common life that color our perceptions and how we “hear” and “mishear” the gospel. We will also need to understand the many varieties of occasions in ministry that will call forth some gospel word, from funeral homilies to stewardship sermons. All this is to say that preaching the gospel for such occasions when lectionaries and calendars do not help is both an exciting and demanding theological task.

The Goal: Providing Theological Helps for Situational Sermons Called “Gospel Commonplaces”

In the chapters that follow, we are not interested in promoting in the pulpit those five-dollar words and fifty-dollar phrases we all learned in our seminary systematics class: terms like hypostatic union, the ransom theory of the atonement, or *perichoresis*. Rather, we assert that the problem with thinking theologically about situations in the pulpit reflects the lack of a suitable homiletical model for doing so. If as some say, theology is “metaphorical,” we can begin by exploring ways that good theology can be told in story, image, and metaphor.⁵ Concrete language for theology in the pulpit could be most useful indeed.⁶ Here we will show you such theology in oral units of thought we’ll call gospel commonplaces.

It’s probably easier to demonstrate the need for our gospel commonplaces by showing you the wealth of materials available for its more frequent counterpart in mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic preaching: the lectionary-based sermon. Let’s say you decide to start with the lectionary text for the day. In that case, you have available to you for sermon preparation all sorts of resources: commentaries, lectionary helps, worship planning materials, guides to biblical preaching, Internet

sermon preparation sites, and so forth. You may not always be able to access the latest scholarship on your text, but you have resources available to you that use biblical scholarship to give you some helpful ideas of what to say. In a commentary you may find a key insight or piece of background material. In a lectionary help, you might come across a beautiful illustration. On some preaching Web site, you stumble across an image that, though you need to tweak it a bit, really illumines what you want to say. These resources don't just give you information; at their best they give you means for developing what it is you actually need to say on a given Sunday in the lectionary calendar.

How different the task is if you want to speak about a problematic situation from the pulpit! You could consult the latest theological texts, but they are rarely accessible to preachers, let alone the average congregation. You might peruse the articles in theological journals, but they, too, can be quite technical. Even preaching books on theology tend to be more in the genre of "theologies of preaching."⁷ While pastors should read and take advantage of such materials, there is really little that is analogous to all the preaching helps available to those who use the lectionary text rather than the situation as their starting point for preaching on a given day.

This book seeks to remedy that situation by appealing at the end of each situational chapter to gospel "commonplaces," a series of theological "topics" on which preachers can draw for developing and organizing what they want to say.

Commonplaces in Rhetoric and Theology

The idea of "commonplaces" or common topics is an old one. The term appeared first in rhetorical manuals in the ancient world. When a speaker wished to figure out what to say, he or she could use either "special topics" unique to the matter being discussed (for instance, an argument about whether to go to war against Troy would presumably include matters such as numbers of ships to get there; the costs of large, empty wooden horses; what one hoped to gain by going to war; etc.). At other points, a speaker might also use "common topics" or commonplaces,

that is, arguments to which one could appeal in different kinds of speeches (such as, “from the lesser to the greater,” as in, “If our troops could make short order of the mighty Minoans, how much more could they truly rout those pathetic Trojans!”). Here commonplaces refer to arguments that you could use in more than one kind of speech.⁸ Given the fact that the situations of ministry are so varied, it might be helpful indeed to refer to a series of homiletical-theological “commonplaces” that one could use to put together what to say in such moments.

The idea of “commonplaces” is not just a rhetorical one, however. In fact, for a long time the Latin form of the term, *loci communes*, was used to designate theological treatises. The title was a very common one, for example, in the Reformation. Theologians like the Reformer Philipp Melancthon wrote his famous work *Loci Communes* to make a brief compendium of Reformation theology more accessible.⁹ In such a time of rapid change, books in the form of *Loci Communes* helped give early shape to emerging Protestant perspectives. In these books the “commonplaces” were the loci of theology: God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, sin, salvation, eschatology, and so forth. It treated theology as a series of “common topics” or commonplaces to reflect on the Christian faith.

Gospel Commonplaces as Theological Sermon-Helps in Ministry Situations

Our goal in this book is to give you gospel commonplaces that will aid you in your work of articulating the gospel in different situations of ministry and church life in the world. Because situations are so diverse, you’ll probably need to add to or otherwise modify what we have here. A book cannot anticipate the special topics or nuances of every situation in ministry! However, it can at least give you some topics, gospel commonplaces, that will get you started. Along the way, we’ll also try to develop them in ways that are more amenable to the oral task that is preaching. To do homiletical theology here means not so much to develop a peculiar language of a systematician, but to do theology in a rhetorical mode using image, story, and metaphor: that is, doing

theology with hearers in mind. By providing you with gospel commonplaces, we hope to give you some basic materials to help you do your own homiletical theological work.

As heavy as that may sound, remember this: as a pastor, *you* are a resident theologian in your congregation. There are probably other people in or outside your parish who can offer better therapy to clients than you can. There are probably also other people who can manage a business better than you can. There are in the average community, however, few people who can relate with insight the unique situation of the people you know and love to the theological riches of the gospel. We hope our gospel commonplaces will help get you started. When difficult or even recurring situations pop up, you'll at least have somewhere to begin.

Our goal, then, is to identify a cluster of theological issues for gospel preachers to think about as they prepare to put their sermons together when certain "situations" arise. Our commonplaces, our homiletical *loci communes*, will not be exhaustive. We will endeavor, however, to make them accessible. Even if you don't choose to use one or more of them in your situational sermon, we hope that they will inspire you (1) to do your own theological work and (2) get your own theological imagination into high gear so you can proclaim the gospel word right where you are.

A Preview: Gospel, Context, and Situation

As we get started, it is important to note that we are using the terms *gospel*, *context*, and *situation* in a particular way. Part of the reason for this is historical. For the last five years we have cotaught a course on the topic of situational preaching to senior students at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary. While we hope to help our students integrate what they learn in preaching class with what they learn in systematic theology class, our overarching goal is a senior student who is able to be a "reflective practitioner" himself or herself. In other words, we want above all to place the tools of good homiletical and theological

reflection into the hands of those about to be ordained so that they can do the difficult and demanding theological work that is serving as a pastor to a congregation.

In order to do this, we have needed to distinguish between three features in congregational life that can only be separated out with some difficulty. The first is the *gospel* we described above: the message of good news that shapes preaching in terms of its form, content, and purpose. The second is *context*, which we are calling the enduring social, cultural, and political features that color the ways in which we who live in the North American context hear the gospel. The third is *situation*, which for us is a moment or crisis that evokes a sense of limit/finitude or calls forth a decision.¹⁰ The reason why it is difficult to distinguish between gospel, context, and situation is that in practice all of these elements interact. As we will demonstrate in the following chapters, it is hard to talk about gospel without considering it in context and in light of a situation.¹¹ What is more, the clarity with which we consider either gospel or context will be greatly enhanced as we move with specificity toward particular situations in ministry. Nonetheless, for the sake of clarity we will try to separate out gospel, context, and situation.

In the process of reading these beginning chapters, you will clearly see that the theology of the gospel articulated here is influenced by the Lutheran tradition. In one sense, it is quite natural to be so particular. Although David is United Methodist and Bob is Lutheran, both of us have been teaching for many years at a Lutheran seminary. Our dialogue about these matters proceeds quite naturally out of that predominantly Lutheran academic context. Nonetheless, pastors of other denominations need not fret that an adapted Lutheran theology of the gospel is utterly irrelevant to their realities. Protestants and Roman Catholics alike share a commitment to preaching the gospel.¹² After all, the gospel of God's free gift of grace is hardly under Lutheran copyright.¹³ Even if some sort of adaptation is required of the reader because of the variety of theological traditions today, such adaptation is certainly of a piece with this whole book. Our gospel commonplaces

will be *starting points* for you and your situational preaching ministry. We trust there will be something of value for you whether you are Lutheran, United Methodist, Presbyterian/Reformed, Baptist, UCC, Disciples, Episcopal/Anglican, or Roman Catholic. As with any situational enterprise, you will need to engage the issues in your way in your own unique situation.

For each of our chapters on situations of parish ministry, we will follow a clear outline. At the beginning of each situational chapter, we will consider matters of context. What are the enduring features of life socially, culturally, politically, and economically that impinge on this moment for proclamation? After that, we will attend to the situation itself. Here we will try to articulate the varieties of ways these situations present themselves. As a result of reflecting on context and situation, we'll offer some practical implications for preaching in those moments. In other words, wrestling with the gospel in light of one's context and situation will give the preacher pause to think about what he or she wants to *emphasize* and *avoid* saying from the pulpit in those times. Finally, each chapter will close with a list of gospel commonplaces. These are the homiletical payoff for situational preachers. Since there are several commonplaces for each situational sermon type, preachers can simply choose one commonplace as a theme for the whole situational sermon, or use more than one if it helps them to string together an unfolding gospel reflection that moves through a series of thoughts to a new understanding or insight. In this way we bring together practical resources that represent the best of both contemporary homiletics and systematic theology.

In order to see the project through, however, we will need to use our understandings of the gospel in context in more than just abstract situations. So after this introduction, where we treat gospel, context, and situation in more general terms, we will next turn to consider certain types of situations that parish pastors face. Chapters 3 and 4 deal with the most prominent and recurrent of these situations: funerals and weddings. Although

the biblical texts prescribed by denominational books of worship for funerals and weddings are useful, they often do not help the preacher to reflect more directly on the theological meaning of the specific situations before them. These two chapters will offer gospel commonplaces to help pastors “think through” what they need to say theologically in such situations. While the therapeutic arts of good pastoral care are indispensable to both funerals and weddings and the many acts of ministry that surround them, there are also theological tasks in these situations and they need to be grounded in something more than mere therapeutic insight or culturally defined common sense for living. The question we will ask here is: What is the gospel we preach in the face of death and on the threshold of shared life together? Most preachers will know these situations intimately. We hope they will enjoy reflecting on them theologically with us in light of the gospel we are all called to preach.

With chapters 5, 6, and 7, we turn to other situations that recur in contemporary parish life, but that are in all likelihood less common than funerals and weddings. Chapter 5 considers “Preaching Gospel in Stewardship.” While many preachers will discuss stewardship in their week-to-week lectionary-based sermons, there are situations in parish life that call for preachers and congregations to reflect more directly on matters before them. For some it may be a looming budget crisis; for others it may be an annual stewardship drive; for still others it could result from a new direction in ministry. Whatever the particulars of the situation, it will be useful to remember that stewardship sermons are not just barely baptized fund-raising appeals. They can be occasions for preaching the gospel. We will consider in chapter 5 some gospel commonplaces that could be useful in many kinds of sermons for situations calling for stewardship.

Chapter 6 looks at “Preaching Gospel in the Face of Injustice.” Again, regular lectionary preaching offers many opportunities to talk about justice in the pulpit. Many texts will also lend themselves to be applied in passing to various situations of importance to congregations. However, no text or lectionary possesses infinite hermeneutical elasticity. Moreover, situations of injustice

do present themselves to congregations in the world. Such situations may just call for more direct gospel speech. With chapter 6 we hope to offer gospel commonplaces to preachers who are confronted with a situation of injustice.

Chapter 7 then turns to moments that are indeed occasional but typically hold the awareness of people in the pew like no other: times of public crises. On Sundays such as those after the space shuttle *Columbia* disaster, the Asian tsunami, the declaration of war in Iraq, or 9/11, what do you say? Clearly chapter 7 cannot fill in the blanks for all moments like these, since they are by nature so different. However, we can outline some gospel commonplaces that will get you started. Many authors and commentators observed that church attendance was up briefly after 9/11. Instead of lamenting that those people did not stay, perhaps we could ask what we *should* say. How do we speak the gospel in the shadow of such awful events? This is precisely the place where preaching and theology can serve God's people in the world.

In our brief final chapter, we invite you to join in the act of theological reflection for preaching. Here the situation is the recurring one of out-church public preaching. It could be the result of an invitation to speak at a baccalaureate, or a Veterans Day event, or on an issue at a denominational meeting at a juridical level. We chose this chapter because such moments outside of congregational meeting do recur. More importantly, however, it gave us a chance to develop a way of inviting you more closely into the process. You can, therefore, by the end of this book anticipate your own "graduation." We hope to help you claim your vocation as a residential theologian of the gospel.

"Church, We've Got a Situation . . . and a Gospel to Preach"

We suspect that the situations we are considering are more than familiar to you. We hope that you'll enter this process as we have: in the spirit of conversation. As professors in our class at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, we point out to our students at the beginning of the semester that the two of us sometimes

disagree. While that sometimes throws the keeners in class who try to figure out whom to suck up to in order to get a good grade, for most people our confession of occasional disagreement actually opens a door. We will not all consider the gospel we preach, the contexts in which it is preached, and the situations we face in the same way. In fact, there's a good chance that the situations that confront us will have their own unique features and shape where we are. We hope our conversation with you here will be a door to a way of thinking about ministry using tools of both homiletics and systematics. We're not asking that you agree with us as much as we are asking you to reflect as a homiletical theologian in your own time and place.

With that, however, we should still confess one thing we hold in common with each other and with you, the reader. What we as preachers do have is a sense that we are called. At some point someone has laid or will likely lay hands on us and say: "Go, preach the gospel." While on most Sundays we will find joy in doing so in light of prescribed readings and the rhythms of calendars, there will be Sundays and other days when a situation will interrupt the normal flow. We want to help you think about your call to preach the gospel on days like that—on days when we must say: "Church, we've got a situation here."