

## PREFACE

*Preaching Matthew* is a hybrid of sorts, combining material usually found in different types of biblical, homiletical, and liturgical resources. From traditional books focused on helping pastors preach consistently through a biblical work, it keeps its eye on the overarching structures, themes, and theological claims that give Matthew its unique character. From commentaries that work passage by passage through a biblical work, it works through Matthew's material in the order Matthew presents it. But from homiletical helps for lectionary preachers, it gives most attention to readings from Matthew (lections) that appear in the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL). In this combination of approaches, preachers long familiar with Matthew may see elements of the First Gospel in a new light and may lead a congregation to experience the liturgical year based on Matthew (Year A in the RCL) in a new way.

This hybrid approach grows out of my understanding of the nature of biblical preaching. To preach biblically does not mean to go to the Bible, discover what it says, and simply repeat or translate it for a contemporary audience. Instead, the focus of biblical preaching (well, of any Christian preaching) is the good news of Jesus Christ—the grace, judgment, and call of God-with-us, here and now, as God has always been with the world. In the sermon, a biblical passage serves as the particular lens for the day for seeing a particular way God is with us and what it means for life in the world corporately as the body of Christ and individually as a disciple of Christ. In sermon preparation (and in the sermon itself), therefore, preachers should focus their gaze less *on* the text and more *through* it to look at life there and find the God made known in the Christ event in new and enlivening ways.

This type of focus changes the way preachers read a biblical text on behalf of a congregation. Critical exegesis is as important as ever, but it is a means to an end. Exegesis during sermon preparation is the process of turning the

lens to sharpen the preacher's focus on the theological, ethical, pastoral, and existential needs of the congregation. Thus this book is exegetical in nature, but it is unapologetically exegesis in service to the pulpit. It does not attempt to be exhaustive in dealing with textual, historical, or literary issues involved in studying Matthew. It does not position the interpretation of different elements of Matthew in either the history of interpretation or among contemporary scholarship. While the nature of this approach means I have avoided the use of footnotes or references to scholarship, I hope the conversation I have had with Matthean scholarship and my dependence on the research of others is evident in the work. For a list of helpful research and important commentaries on the book of Matthew, an appendix indicating sources for further reading has been included.

So I have been selective in what I have included in this book, assuming that preachers who turn to it will (1) already be familiar with general issues related to Matthean scholarship from seminary or other biblical studies and (2) have done significant exegesis on a passage of interest using critical commentaries based in historical and literary criticism, Bible dictionaries, and other resources before turning to my discussion of that text. In other words, this homiletical, lectionary-oriented commentary on Matthew is meant to help preachers as they begin to turn from detailed, critical commentaries toward the pulpit. Preachers have not moved so close to the sermon that they are looking for sermon imagery and the like but close enough that synthesis of exegetical findings and theological possibilities is needed. In other words, while this book is not intended as a resource that fits the needs of preachers closely examining a biblical text for the first time in their sermon preparation, neither is it a resource for the final stages of sermon preparation where they are filling out their reading of a text with the "stuff" of the congregation. It stands in the middle of the week of the preparation, just at that point where the preacher is beginning to let go of reading the text for its own sake and moving toward interpreting it for the sake of a specific congregation set in a specific historical time and place.

But to open this book only on Tuesday or Wednesday each week to see what it adds to what one has already read about the Gospel lection for the week will be to miss some of what I hope it can offer the preacher working through Matthew throughout Year A of the lectionary cycle. The book is shaped by a *cumulative approach* to preaching week in and week out in the same congregation, an approach for which I have advocated in different ways in *The Homiletic of All Believers: A Conversational Approach* (2005) and *Reading and Preaching the Lectionary: A Three-Dimensional Approach to the Liturgical Year* (2007). Homileticians and biblical scholars are perpetual guest speakers and

often write in such a way that assumes pastors experience the pulpit in the same way we do. But every parish pastor knows that the transformative power of the pulpit lies primarily in speaking and hearing the gospel and in reinforcing that message Sunday after Sunday to people who sit in the same seat each week. It is through repeated exposure that hearers assimilate the vocabulary of the faith and have their lives shaped by it. Pastor-preachers must be intentional in shaping their sermons so that the messages, concepts, imagery, and applications of their sermons across time overlap and reinforce one another. The lectionary's focus on a primary synoptic gospel for a whole year is helpful in doing this.

The lectionary has led preaching to be more biblical in recent decades than it was in the mid-twentieth century (when topical preaching reigned). Oddly, however, congregations seem more biblically illiterate than ever. While the lectionary cannot be blamed for this problem, the way it is shaped and certainly the way we use it in worship (especially in the Protestant pulpit) has contributed to this problem. Basically, each Sunday we look at an individual pericope and rarely get a sense of the whole scope and nature of the biblical work from which it comes. This disjointed relationship the congregation has with the Bible is exacerbated by the fact that preachers jump from Gospel to Old Testament to epistle to Gospel to psalm week after week. Taking into consideration the movement of the liturgical year and the constantly changing needs of a congregation, this jumping around makes good sense. But sustained homiletical focus on a single biblical book (say, on Matthew in Year A of the RCL cycle) can promote a cumulative approach to the work (and thus to a particular approach to the Gospel) and help increase biblical knowledge more broadly.

But even with sustained attention by the preacher and congregation, we need to recognize three ways the RCL uses the Gospels that get in the way of increased knowledge of that year's synoptic gospel. First, from Advent through Pentecost, the themes and movements of the liturgical year, not the themes and shape of the Gospel narratives, determine the choices of Gospel readings. In ordinary time, the lectionary does provide semi-continuous readings through the Gospel for the year. The problem is that the selections obviously omit those texts used in the first half of the year, which contain some of the key passages for understanding the gospel as a whole (for example texts from the opening and closing of the narratives) Second, the three-year cycle of the lectionary means that John does not get a year dedicated to it. The Fourth Gospel is broken into pieces across the three years, interspersed with the other three Gospels, interrupting the focus on the primary Gospel for the year and confusing the congregation about their differences. Third, even three years of Sundays is

not enough to cover all of the material in all three of the Synoptic Gospels. Thus, the lectionary takes a harmonizing approach to how it uses much of the gospel material. If a pericope from one Gospel is used as a lection, its parallel is often omitted from the other Synoptics. Thus, for instance, Matthew's particular redactional take on a scene is lost if Mark's version is used. Since Mark is the shortest of the three Synoptics, a greater percentage of it is read during Year B than is read of Matthew in Year A or Luke in Year C. And because Mark is primarily narrative in content, much of the overlapping narrative material of Matthew and Luke is not read in Years A and C with a heavier focus instead on the sayings material of those Gospels.

To compensate for these problems, this book takes a cumulative approach to preaching Matthew, not just preaching in general. We begin with an introduction to Matthew, meant to serve as an overview to be read especially before beginning to preach on the gospel throughout Year A. The topics of the introduction are those found in most commentaries, but they are written in a way that assumes the reader has some of knowledge of the issues already and thus are here oriented toward the pulpit. How do the sociohistorical situation, theological worldview, and literary characteristics of Matthew influence how we preach the Gospel across a year's time in Year A of the lectionary cycle? Throughout the book, examination of individual lections will include references to these homiletically ripe, overarching exegetical observations.

In addition to this broad introduction to the First Gospel as a whole, each section of the narrative includes an overview. Preachers wanting to move deeper into a review of Matthew than the Introduction offers could read through these section overviews also at the beginning of Year A. Primarily, however, these section overviews are meant to be helpful to preachers in contextualizing lections that fall within that section. To preach cumulatively, pastors will need to keep aware of structures and themes within Matthew to which individual lections relate. Scanning the section overview before preaching on a single lection or perusing it carefully when dealing with a series of semi-continuous readings from a section will assist in this endeavor.

Finally, then, the most detailed examination comes in the comments on the individual lections. The comments will analyze the structure, themes and theological focus of the passage. Also, suggestions will be offered for connecting in sermons the Matthean lection of the day with the section of the gospel of which it is a part as well as with other places in the Gospel sharing concepts, vocabulary and theological perspective. Thus the overviews and the detailed commentary are meant to be in conversation in such a way as to strengthen the use of the text in the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ.

While it is not the focus of this book, it is strongly suggested that pastors who plan to preach a great deal on Matthew (be it in Year A of the lectionary cycle or taking a *lectio continua* approach to Matthew) sponsor Bible studies on Matthew outside of worship. Such studies can draw on these cumulative themes and reinforce the congregation's identification with them when they are raised in sermons.