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Touchstones for Preaching Transcript of Special Touchstone 3: Preaching Justice

presented by
Rev. Richard Clifford, S.J., Ph.D.

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Norbert Lohfink’s *Option for the Poor*

I wanted to go through the first, the first set on that which he calls “Horizons, God, and the Poor in the Ancient Near East.” The first set, this would be A, is I think, very significant. I’m going to... I’m not going to go through it all. But I wanted... I think his reasoning is very clear, and I’m glad it’s in thesis form.

God is interested in the here and now.

The first point that he makes is God is interested in the here and now, and “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”—that is right now, today. He does not want, therefore, people to think of a time that will come when all is well, but rather to think of what’s going on in the world today. And there’s not... And the Bible doesn’t oppose this world and the other world. It doesn’t say, “Well that’s okay, but in some future time it’s going to be nice.” So he’s interested in the here and now. That’s pretty obvious, but I think it needs to be affirmed now and then.

God is interested in material things.

The second thing is God is interested in material things. We tend I think, in line with our Greek heritage, to prize the spiritual over the material, if you could even make that distinction. And that certainly was a very major factor in early Christianity, the Late Antiquity they call it. There was always this option for very spiritual things. It was not just the Church; but was the culture at large. And the Bible, on the other hand, shows a God who is interested in leading the people into “a land of milk and honey,” which is to say, simply, a place where you could get food from the earth and therefore material things. There is a worldliness, a proper worldliness to Christianity. It is important.

God is interested in society.

God is interested, too, in a third point; in society—not just individuals—but in groups and especially in the holy people, the holy community. “You shall love the Lord with all your heart,” is plural and I think it’s important to see that. But it’s again, it’s *we know it in our heads, but we often don’t operate according to it.*

God is interested in plenitude and riches.

Then finally, a fourth point that I think is very important: God is interested in plenitude and in riches, and Lohfink takes after a view of poverty in the Bible. There was a tendency in post-World War Europe particularly, to stress very much the poor, the *anawim*, and so on. While there’s some truth in it, in a certain way he really wants to make it clear that God is interested in people having enough, and more than enough. Like in the Gospel there’s always leftover; they have to take baskets with the leftover food, and that is also true in the Bible... One of the favorite biblical words that is translated

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into English is “sated,” to be sated, to have enough, not to be simply, to be satisfied-plus. And I think that’s an important point. So, God really wants people—when you look at the biblical images like the... in the Book of Revelation—it’s abundant. Everything is more than you want, than you actually need, I should say. So that’s another point that needs to be stated. This is... God does not want people to live austere lives unless they choose it for, for good reasons, but for everyone to have plenty.

God’s interest in the world unleashes a drama.

And the last point I think is, to me, the most significant, what Lohfink calls “God’s interest in the world unleashes a drama.” And this is, I think, one of the main points that I prize because it helps us get around what has been a critique of liberation theology: that it leads to social unrest because the poor rise up against the wealthy. This is now, again, a caricature, but when the poor become wealthy, there will be a new... there’ll be something new in the future. It’s going to be the same kind of inequities in society. But what Lohfink is saying is that when we say in the prayer, “Thy will be done,” we are really asking that a drama begin, that God—actually right now dealing with material things—begins to redress the imbalance in the world where there is a large number of people who have no food at all. We can see them in our own country, in this country, and then in other parts of the world, where obviously the people who are hungry and the people who have no housing and the people who have such burdens on them—especially women and children—that it’s very moving.

So he says that what happens, why is God on the side of the poor, says Lohfink. And the reason, he says, is because the poor are the people whose own salvation has not yet happened. God doesn’t hate the rich. The rich may... The poor are no more lovable than the rich, I suppose, or they’re equally lovable. Then some poor people are very hard to love. Some rich are charming and delightful to be with. It’s nothing... That’s not what the issue is. The issue is *why is God to be found among the poor, with the poor*, and that is because they have not yet experienced salvation in that sense of which I spoke. Something that is happening today, something that involves the real world, their material life, their social life, their... the fact that they have enough food and adequate housing, something that brings joy into their lives, whole families, governments that work for the people, and societies that really are functional. That hasn’t happened yet for these people, and that’s why God—who is interested in the flourishing of the human race, not simply with the existence—but that the human race not only exist but live in joy and some security, and so on. And that’s why God is on the side of the poor. And I think that’s... Looking at it that way really gets rid of a con... view of society in which there’s always going to be poor who are moving against the rich, and so on. That’s... That’s one of the things that I think Lohfink has helped us overcome, and keep. We want to keep the basic elements of liberation theology, but we don’t want to allow it to become used politically for one gain or other. So I wanted to put... I wanted to put that forward. The... Yeah, that’s one of the main points that Lohfink makes and I think it’s a good one. It’s a good thing to keep in mind.

I just wanted to say something further about Lohfink’s book, and this is... and I’m not going to go through the whole thing. You can read it yourself and I have the summary there. But he... One of the points that Lohfink makes is to show that the origin of Israel is depicted in the book of Exodus. The book of Exodus is the central—in a certain sense—the central book of the Bible as far as Israel is concerned, because that’s the story of its origin. We’ll talk about origins in a bit, but I just wanted to say that’s when it began. So it’s very important to see how the book of Exodus runs. It runs this way. It shows a people who had really forgotten their heritage. They don’t remember, really, very vividly with any kind of actualization where they came from, the fact that their God has been with them. And so they’re pretty much run out of gas and they’re pretty dispirited. So when... when Moses... when God calls Moses to lead the people out, Moses could have done a couple of things, as Lohfink says. He could have opened a kind of gigantic Vincent de Paul Society that brought food and clothing to the people. But instead, what God did was to take them out of that place and to bring them into another place. And Lohfink makes the... gives us the very useful phrase, to “make them

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into a contrast society.” In other words, God didn’t simply alleviate their here-and-now needs, but brought them out of the place where they were by defeating Pharaoh. So there was a... they were liberated from Pharaoh’s tyranny. Pharaoh had become a virtual god. And that is only one step, however. The liberation is only one step.

The further step is they have to be formed into a new people. And that’s when you go to Sinai and you find that they’re given a leader, Moses. They’re given a land, that is, a ticket to the land, so to speak—the proleptic. Sinai stands for Cana. They’re given a temple, a place where God dwells. They’re given a God, and they’re given a set of laws and traditions. This is what you need to be a people. So God’s way, the Lord’s way of rescuing Israel is to make them into a contrast people. They’re going to be different. They’re deliberately different. We like to be like everybody else. At least, I suppose, all of us go through this point in adolescence, where we really want to be like everybody else; you don’t want to stand out. But in this case, they’re deliberately made to be different so that they will stand out in relief. They will be visible and people can look at them and get some idea of what it means, what God’s love and fidelity and loyalty mean, how it affects human flourishing and how it affects people. So that’s another... another point that I think Lohfink makes that I would like to highlight because I think it’s a, again, it’s... He’s not the first to make it in some ways, but he has brought it together in a way that does make sense to us.

Justice in the Bible

But I just wanted to say a few further items about justice that we find in the Bible. These are not exhaustive, but they are significant.

The will of the lawgiver is important.

The first thing is that the will of the lawgiver is very important. I think we tend to... as dean I’m kind of learning how to exert, exercise authority. I’m not... I’m not by nature a master of the universe, and the reason I have this job is because I was... I thought that the move to Cambridge was very, very good. I thought this was a great thing, [voice from the audience] and the move from Cambridge, too, to Brighton and becoming a part of BC, etc. I thought there were more resources. So Father Leahy [the president of Boston College] said, “Well since you’re so enthusiastic, why don’t you run it?” So, that’s why I’m here, not... not because I applied for it. But I... One of the issues when you’re in this thing new is you have to, when you make a change or when you do something, you really want to have backing and explain to people by what authority you do this because they don’t like you to do it on your own authority. They don’t like you to say, “Do it because I say so.” God can do it, but not me.

But in the Bible that... that need to show how reasonable something is, *that’s why you should do it, you know we agreed to it, it’ll help you, it’ll make you a better person, therefore you should do it.* That isn’t really there. In the Bible the... the authority of the lawgiver—and this is not only true in the Bible, it’s true in that culture—the authority of the lawgiver is very important. “I, the Lord, have spoken. You shall be holy because I am holy.” That’s very elliptical. So it... it really rests in the lawgiver. We would tend to say, “Well, there’s a law code here and according to the law of the state of Massachusetts you can’t go 75 miles an hour in a 25-mile-an-hour zone. But in the Bible the authority of the lawgiver is the authority. God doesn’t say there’s a... “According to the statute it’s...,” God says, “You shall do it because I’m there.” So, there’s a very, very prominent presence of the person in the authority of the Bible. It needs to be... it’s a cultural issue that we need to accept, but in some ways it makes the law much more personal. And when you obey, therefore, you’re really connecting to a personal will. So religiously, it can have advantages. You’re not doing it because it’s reasonable or because you’ll be a better person. You’re doing it because God has said this and you are related to God. So that’s an important point. I like to... One friend of mine who has been teaching

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this stuff for many years, he said, "Therefore, in our culture it means it's a conclusion from priests with reasoning." In the... ancient world the term for "therefore" basically means it's a statement of will. "I am the Lord, therefore..." That's... that's a strange statement if you think about it. But if you think about it a little bit more you can see what's going on there. It's very strongly the presence of the lawgiver in the law.

Justice is relational.

Another point is, well, it's... this is the second point here that I've got is, is very... very much related to that, and that is that the justice of the Bible is relational. How a thing, act, person relates to a stand of justice. That would probably be... We would probably agree to that, too. This is legal if it agrees with the laws of the state of Massachusetts or something. That's true in the Bible, but in the... but in the Bible there is no order or fate beyond God to which things should conform. In other words, it conforms to what God wants. So, it's very... it's very, very authoritarian in one sense, not negatively necessarily, but it's very authoritarian.

Law codes are statements of God's will.

A couple of other things that I think are just interesting, not necessarily particularly of importance in preaching with them. There were the... You probably know there are many ancient law codes, the famous being the Law Code of Hammurabi from the 18th BC. It's in the Louvre—a beautiful thing. The king is there with the sun over him and he's taking... he's the guy that enforces the law. But those law codes are really not like modern law codes, like the law code of Massachusetts and the Napoleonic law code. What they are is basically out there to be read and taken as God's statement and God's will, and they are posted in a... kind of ancient PR move so that ordinary people who look—and can't read, of course, but they look—and see this beautiful statement. That's what God wants to happen in the world. So it's a kind of an inter... it's another way of saying what I've been saying, these, these ancient law codes.

A judgment is more an intervention than a pronouncement.

Another point which I think is very significant and that..., and I'll talk about it more, but I'll just say it now, as a kind of general principle. In the... In our world, justice is usually a decision that a judge makes after hearing the arguments presented by both sides, the plaintiff and the defendant. So the... and in the... On the lawns in front of many American small towns there is the statue of the Roman goddess, *Justicia* (Justice) and she has the scales of justice, and there's two pans, and she's blindfolded because she is trying to hear the argument and not be influenced by the people who present it. So it's supposed to be dispassionate, it's supposed to be equal. But in the Bible that is not how justice works. So it's rather surprising to modern Western people that this isn't really the ideal.

In the Bible, justice or a judgment is... is usually an intervention by God on behalf of the aggrieved party. See how that different... how different that is from a... modern judge? A modern judge is supposed to be impartial, and then if a judge says, "Okay, I award you this, this money," a court officer will make sure that that money is paid to the plaintiff. But in the Bible, God is both the judge and the intervener. He intervenes so that if... a poor widow cries out to God that her savings have been taken by some heartless tyrant, she hopes that God will directly intervene, punish publicly the person who wronged her, and uphold her publicly so that people will know that her... that she was in the right and that he, the persecutor of her, was in the wrong. In other words, you want the world to know you are in the right and that your enemy is in the wrong, and you want God to do it now. And so, when people talk about the God of vengeance and so on, it doesn't really mean... it doesn't mean revenge in the modern sense. It means a God who will, in fact, act for me now. So justice, therefore, judgment is more an intervention than it is a pronouncement. And we'll talk about that a little bit

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later, but I think it's a... it's a real difference between the way the Bible conceives judgment and the way we in our modern legal system conceive judgment.

The role of law in the Bible

Another point, again this is more of a random point but it's worth noting. What is the role of law in the Bible? And so on. One of the things that I think most modern people have—and there's a strain I think in a kind of August... Augustinian tradition and it's, it's certainly true in a Lutheran interpretation of that—is that law really does not belong in the Bible because it doesn't belong in the world of human relationships. What you really need to do is to be spontaneous and free before God, and then relate to God without the need of laws and so on. When we speak of legalism, and we speak of..., that's a negative thing. But in the Bible there wasn't that bias that laws were meant to regularize relationships, and people did not feel that putting, developing a contract between two people—whether they be equals or whether they be God and the people—really spoiled the spontaneity and the love. They did not feel that... So the... law really is right ingrained in the Pentateuch. The Pentateuch. Jews call the Pentateuch the *Torah*, and *Torah* can be... it's usually translated by Christians as "law." But Jewish scholars prefer to translate it as "teaching" because they... know the Christian accusation of legalism against Judaism, and they don't... want to play into it. So they want to see it as teaching. And I think it's important to see that the Bible does not see any contradiction between the Decalogue and the legal codes and a loving, spontaneous relationship to the Lord. They don't see it that way. So we, we tend to maybe have a little hang-up there; at least, many, many moderns do.

Now what is the Decalogue, for example, the Ten Commandments? Many, most of the Ten Commandments can be duplicated in other parts of the Bible. They're not original, really. The... coveting is perhaps original. The coveting the neighbor's... The plotting to take the neighbor's wife rather than doing it, just trying to do it. That's a little original. But the rest—worshiping the Lord alone—that's... standard throughout the Bible. What's different about it, it's a... catalog of ten laws, Ten Commandments rather—some in negative, some in positive, mostly in negative forms—that define the people. Do that, and you're in. Don't do those, and you're out. That's how you get in. That's how you are a member. This is the... This is the club's rules, so to speak, to put it kind of crudely. And if you don't do it, you're out. You're just not there. If you worship another god, forget it. You're not... a member of the people. If you dishonor and disrespect your parents in a very aggressive way, you're not in. If you commit adultery, you're out; that sort of thing. So that's really a kind of defining. You say yes to it. It's the only words that God spoke directly to Israel at Sinai. The rest of the words he spoke through Moses, but the Ten Commandments were given without intervention, without mediation. They were given directly to the people, and they had to say yes; how could you say no, I suppose. But that makes you an Israelite. So...there, you could see then, the law is there.

Okay, finally, the last point I'm going to make is, is that the king had a role in implementing the law. The king was kind of the patron. You know, God... the king represents to the people God's presence, and he was the lieutenant, so to speak. You know, God is not visible. You can't go into God's room, and have a cigar, and talk, talk it out. Now the king represents the Lord to the people and therefore, he's "the son" and the God is the father. That's father/son language in the New Testament. Much of it comes from this, this language of kingship and so on. And so the king is responsible for the implementation of that, and at times social justice could mean social policy, almost. So those are some general considerations about justice.

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The Origins of Justice

So what I'd like to do now is to talk about justice in the context of the divine governance of the world. I mentioned before that I wanted to talk about justice, not only in social justice, but justice in general as God's design for the world, God's... intent for the world, what God really wants the world... what God really wants to happen in the world. That... his will be done, and overcome human resistance and entrenched evil. So I'm going to talk about it in... in that way. And when... So what I'd like to do is to take three foundation moments in the Bible, three moments... in which God founds or establishes or creates a reality because in... those instances the divine intent is going to be very visible.

You've got to look at, at a world that is pre-Darwin, right? We think in a world, in a post-Darwinian world, things begin very simple. Hardly... you can hardly recognize them from what they... And then, they develop and become more complex and richer, and they go as... when we experience them. They're very, very complex, and we try to understand their complexity. But in the biblical world..., it was pre-Darwin, remember, by a long shot. And so, what in the Bible and in comparable literatures of the time, the moment of origin was extremely important. Why? Because it was that... at that point people felt the impress of God was the clearest. Nothing had yet happened. So when God makes the man, when he makes human beings, ... When is that most clear? At the very moment of, of the making. So if you want to understand what marriage is, you don't look at... you don't do a statistical survey of married couples, or a psychological profile on them. You go back to the first time. And when was the first time? The man and the woman in the Garden. And so, you look at that and you look at the first time to see both the one, the glories of marriage, but also to see why it is that so many married couples seem to have problems.

And so, also with language. Why is it that people speak many languages? Well you don't do a survey of languages by going around the world. You... look more or less at the Genesis 11, and that gives you an insight about, about language. Why is it that people speak different languages, and so on. So you go back to origins. Well if that's true, if the thing is given whole and entire what God makes it, then it might be worthwhile to go to three founding moments, three key founding moments...portrayed in the Bible, and then to work, to look at them for some clues to what justice means. To know the origin of something is to know its essence, and so I tell people if you want to know the essence of something in the Bible, you go to its origin.

So, I just took three founding moments in the Bible as opportunities to understand what... justice means. And just look... And the first founding moment is going to be the foundation of the entire world, the world that we know, the world that we human beings inhabit. It's different from the world of heaven, it's where the angels serve God in pure spirit and without disobedience. But we are more complicated. So that period, then, the founding moment of Israel, the Exodus. And then the founding moment, the work of Jesus, is a new Exodus. So I want to just say a few words about each one of them.

Genesis 1 and 2

When we look at Genesis 1, and 1-11, we notice that there are two stories of origins. One is, of course, the famous seven-day creation in Genesis 1, and the second one is a long creation story, the creation flood story that goes from Genesis 2 to Genesis 11, basically. I think that's the way most people would see that today. And we see... a couple of things that are... that help us understand God's intent, therefore, God's justice, how God wants this world to work. And one of the things we see here is, especially pre-flood, we see... First of all, we see human beings endowed with freedom, and God will never interfere with that. But we see also human beings inclined to evil. And when they sin, God immediately shows up. Now that's the pre-flood period because that doesn't happen any more today. Or else would have... God would have shown up with the... house, when the bad housing loans were

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first starting to be made. But... in the pre-flood world which is different from our world, I think the flood marks the difference. But in those days you could talk to God, and so on. It was... a different world, a little more childlike in some ways. But, we also find that God is... comes immediately on the scene when people are disobedient, as in the man and the woman. They weren't satisfied with their status as material beings who are supposed to be... work in the Garden and enjoy the Garden, but also to, to be obedient to God's instructions. God shows up when Cain kills Abel. And God shows up earlier though, when Cain was angry that his sacrifice was not accepted. God comes and explains to him why. And basically, the reason seems to me to be because I'm God and I don't... I didn't want to accept your sacrifice. And Cain does not like that, and what happens is Cain's anger is directed—not to God, which it probably should be—but to his brother. And then when he kills his brother, God shows up and tells him it's going to be redressed. His deeds will be punished.

In the flood generation, there's a decline in morals, and by the time of Genesis 6 the world is in a chaotic state, and God decides to end the experiment. It's... a mess, and I think that we have to realize how radical that statement is when God says, "I'm sorry I made man." That is a stunning statement. It's... shocking. I don't think most people could really handle that because it means that God didn't know what was going to happen because he did not want to interfere with human freedom. But at any rate, God then sees one man who is just—Noah—and one man is enough. The sight of one just person is enough to persuade God to try it again. And so the flood comes, the evil is wiped out, and then it started again, this time with singling out a particular people rather than trying to do it all at once. So the justice there is pretty clear and its punishment done immediately. In the post-flood generation though, the punishment will be done, not immediately but in a hidden way and somehow Israel is going to have a role in implementing justice.

One of the other points that I think is... We see a lot about how the world is going to work because this is when the design is clear and everybody's clear about it is the, is God's generosity. "Be fertile and multiply," which means that *I want you to exercise your procreative powers so that... there will always be people in the world.* That's a, a sign of God... is that he invites people to enter into the rhythms of the life-giving rhythms of the universe. And the second thing is "Fill the earth and subdue it," which means it really relates to land, because... if you didn't have land, you couldn't live. There was no refrigeration, no truck farms. It's your land. If you don't have land, you can't live. When God says..., "Fill the earth and have land," it means that he's giving it to each person, each people. Each group has a land. It means that God wants that... people to have its land and to keep it and to draw food from it. Later on, when... And so that's really constitutive. You're defined by these two huge imperatives: procreate and continue in existence.

So in other words, God wants people to live, and you notice the corporate familial side of it. It's not individuals, but it's the family. And the other one is to live. And when we come to later on into Israel, you'll see a lot of fights between the king and the peasants. The king is going to take the land away from them, and the peasants know in their hearts that this isn't the way it should be. It should be, every family should have the land and draw from it, the land, the food they need to live. So...that gives us a glimpse...of God's, of justice. It shows God just and redressing, but it also shows us a God who is going to—especially in the post-flood generation; the post-flood world is our world, that's the world of our experience; the pre-flood world is, is different—that God will be working to effect that, to bring it about. So, again... justice is a process.

Israel: Exodus

The second founding moment is the book of Exodus where God addresses the evil in a new way. And I mention this with regard to Norbert Lohfink's book, that he [God] removes the slaves and he takes them out of the Egyptian system, and he creates a society having all the usual institutions of a nation. That is as I mentioned before, God, they have their own God now, they have their leader, they have

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their land, and they have their laws and traditions. And they are a contrast society. But, before they can be so, God insists that they assent to it, that they agree to it. And so if you look at Exodus 19, Moses runs up and down the mountain, I think three times if not four times, to make sure that everyone is on board and that the people can say yes. He's concerned that the people might not fully understand the implications of being God's people. So poor Moses is getting... his exercise by running, running up and down the mountain between God and the people. And when they... do agree, God says to them, "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my commandment, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. The whole earth is mine, to be sure, but you will be special to me, my priestly kingdom and a holy nation." So, God forms their society, and Israel that is shaped by the just God, will show the nations God's generosity and power. So the holy nation, the holy people here, has a role in mediating God's justice. Remember... it was when God saw Noah that he realized that one individual could, or one family could affect the whole world. Otherwise, God would have wiped out the nation. It was Noah's... It was the sight of Noah that made God think again and devise the plan to use a single [person]. So, that's another moment, the Exodus. The people here are really given a role to show forth to the world what, who God is, and they are given a role in implementing God's justice.

And one of the points that later will come out in the prophets when they speak to the people is the people are supposed, themselves, to be a just society, and that when they are not just to each other then it destroys their visibility and their credibility. And that's an important point. There's this... orientation to the nations that is part of Israel's... Israel is a, you could say, contrast society to be sure, but it's also a society with an inbuilt orientation to the *goyim*, to the nations. Jews tend to read, I must say, Jews tend to sometimes read the Bible, to read the story, as if Israel was just Israel. But if you read Genesis 1-11 and especially Isaiah 40-66 and other texts, you also have the impression that Israel is always a relational nation. It's got a role to the... nations, and it's... kind of... a clearer statement of what God asks of the human race.

The Work of Jesus as the New Creation, the New Exodus

Now the... third founding moment is—and I can do this quickly—is the work of Jesus in the New Testament, which I think is a new Exodus and the creating of a new Israel. This is sometimes overlooked by scholars who, I think, downplay the Exodus motifs in the New Testament. But it is really a founding moment, not as if Israel, the old Israel is not replaced. God is never... God is faithful to covenants made, and the agreement was *you are my people and you will always be my people*. So that's been made clear by John Paul II and many others—you know, the covenant never revoked. So, it isn't replacing and displacing. It is really... A moment has come when the people are to be renewed and the renewal will take place in the same event by which the people were made in the first place, by an Exodus.

So Jesus comes as a new Moses, which he is portrayed especially clearly in the Gospel of Matthew as the new Moses. And what does he do? He chooses twelve. Well obviously that is... the Twelve Tribes. These... You've got to begin a new people with twelve. So they're the twelve individuals who then later will become the foundations of the... people. He feeds the people in the wilderness. This is pretty obviously... I mean in the Bible it tends to be a little indirect. They don't say, "I am now citing Exodus 14." They just say, "Do it." So he feeds the people in the wilderness. He gives the law authoritatively. He teaches authoritatively, not like the scribes and Pharisees, which most people would take—most New Testament scholars would take—as he does, not cite rabbis as most rabbis would do. They'd say, "As Rabbi José said," etc. But Jesus says, "You have heard it said, but I say..." So, again... the lawgiver comes right up there with the person. He explicitly, in the... Last Supper associates his, the shedding of his blood with the shedding of the blood in Exodus 24. And this is a... meal as the meal in Exodus 24 was, that seals the covenant. It's a group of people who get together,

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make an agreement, and ratify their agreement by sharing a meal. And so that takes place at the... Last Supper. So it's a... new covenant that's predicted by Jeremiah according to the... New Testament.

And he also speaks about the kingdom of God. He speaks about it, in fact... that's the main theme, "The kingdom of God is at hand." What Jesus there is speaking of is, he's speaking of the reign of God, the governing of God. And that would, everyone would agree... that's the theme of the Old Testament. That's the theme of the Hebrew Scriptures. But what Jesus does is add something new: *he is at hand*. In other words, there's a new phase in that history that has come to be. The new phase is me. I embody that, and this is a... I am representative of the justice and the design and the plan that you have seen spoken of in the Old Testament, or in your Scriptures, they would call them. (Obviously, they wouldn't have the Old Testament at that time.) And so on. So I think that by looking at it that way, three founding moments in which what is meant by justice becomes visible, might be a way of looking at it.

The Prophets

What I would like to do now, first of all, is give a kind of overview of the prophets and a way of understanding them together. Now obviously, in the... Catholic, in the Christian Bible there are four major prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel—and twelve minor prophets. The minor prophets are called minor prophets because their books are short, not because they were unimportant, as someone says. But in the Jewish canon Daniel is not considered to be a prophet; he's considered to be a part of the later Scriptures. But we're not going to talk about Daniel so it really doesn't matter that much. But how... Is there a way of understanding the prophets? And it seems to me, here's the way I do it and I think it's simple and it also clarifies what they're doing.

A Crisis in Israel: 750 BC – 500 BC

During... There was a huge crisis in Israel that lasted from 750 B.C. to 500. Previous to that time Israel had a... relatively coherent understanding of itself, and that basically was, *we were slaves in Egypt to Pharaoh and now we are slaves or servants to Yahweh in Cana, so that we went from there to here. And now what does God ask? God asks us to be faithful, to be loyal, and so on.* But, about the middle of the 8th Century there appear on the scene two or three prophets who say that Israel is going to be destroyed. And the chief one who says that is Amos. "The end has come," says Amos, "and you've got to take that seriously." These... There's Amos first, then, there's Hosea in the north, the only northern prophet that we have; the rest all preach in the south. And then there's... Micah, and then there's First Isaiah. And they all agreed that the end has come.

Now what does that mean? Well, if you look at what they're talking about, it means that they are indicting Israel for failing to live up to its call as God's holy people who worship Yahweh alone, who worship the Lord alone. And what they're saying is, "because you have not worshipped the Lord alone and because you have oppressed your neighbor..." In other words, there's a vertical dimension and a horizontal dimension. The horizontal is, you have oppressed your...neighbor. There are widows and there are orphans. There are people who have lost their land. Wealthy landowners have... taken their land, etc. And you have... you are worshipping gods other than the Lord. What they're saying is therefore, what is going to happen therefore is, "The blessings that you have received because you were the Lord's special people (that would be very, very practical ones—protection from enemies, fertility of the land, a flourishing of your social life), all of those things are going to be finished because God... you have turned your back on God and you cannot receive the blessings that God is giving you because you've turned your back on him." In other words, you can't get a present, you can't get a gift if the person... if you turned your back on the gift giver. There's no way you can if your hands are not stretched out.

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The Crisis of Divine Wrath and Divine Process

Now the prophets see, because they see God in highly personal terms, they interpret it as divine wrath. They interpret it as *God is really angry because God has given you of God's very self. You said, no. You dismissed Him. Therefore, God's anger is there.* So they... raised the emotional stakes pretty high. You could do it impersonally, but that's not the way the Bible runs. God is personal and so has a personal relationship with the people. So what the prophets then begin to do is, there is a process. And, and let me just step back; well just let me talk about the process. As the... prophets see it, and especially as Israel saw it later when they edited the... prophetic books, because the books we have of the prophets are not verbatim reports. They are books; they are biblical books that have been edited in the light of the whole process. Okay. What... If you step back and look at the process, you can see something like this. The first prophets particularly, Amos and Hosea, indict Israel for breach of covenant, and they also say that... Amos says, "I'm not sure that God is going to do anything; I'm not sure that you have any continuity left." But I think what Amos is really saying, Amos is really using hyperbole to tell them the end has come. But then he says, "But you can still repent." There's always the sense that God will change if you change. So the... 8th century prophets are partly concerned, are largely concerned with announcing the destruction, in other words, to a people who just don't get it. And that's even First Isaiah—they don't get it.

Then as time goes on, what happens? You begin to have the Assyrian invasion. So the... foreign policy dissolves. It used to be that Israel was able to defend itself against the other 9th century enemies of the Aramean city states. But in the... 8th century they meet the superpowers. It's like Finland versus Russia in the earlier period. There's no way in which Israel could stand up to so massive a power as Assyria. So at this point, it's being empirically clear that they're going down the tubes. There's also increasing social injustice. Whenever a people has social pressures on it from the outside, things begin to fall apart inside. You know... king follows king, dynasties change; that's a sign of ill health.

By the time of the 7th century... when Jeremiah comes on the scene, the... enemy has changed from Assyria to Babylon, but the same problem. They... Israel is trying to defend itself against a power it cannot really defend itself against. And so by 587, in 586 the... Babylonians invade the city. They destroy the . They exile the king and the royal family, and the city is destroyed, and we enter the period of the exile. But that's not the end, and that's 586.

Then, with... Ezekiel 2 begins to show... what happens after the nadir, what happens when things hit rock bottom. Well, Ezekiel says, "There's still hope... because God... will remain faithful to the covenant. It's not because of you, it's because of God's fidelity." And then in Second Isaiah, Isaiah 40-66, we begin to have prophecy go into the latter part of the 6th century. And so at the end of... Second Isaiah says, "God had changed and turned," and now the message is, "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people because you've paid your price and now I'm going to bring you back and restore you as of old."

The Prophets Interpret the Process

So if you look from 750-500, just step back a bit. What do you see? You see a people who were smug and who thought that life would go on forever just the way it was. You have prophets saying, "Ah, that's not possible. It's interrupted. God is going to punish you, and you must accept this phase of punishment. If you do, God will protect you." In other words, see the punishment as an opportunity, but the people didn't quite do it that way. So they had to go through the Assyrians, and then they had to go through the Babylonians, and they had to reach rock bottom which was the destruction of the whole world. I mean the promises—you consider how shattering that thing is—God's promise that I will always deliver you, etc., it's all gone, it's a total bankruptcy. Your whole

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tradition is, is absurd. And that's what they had to go through, as well as the physical destruction and the deaths and all that sort of thing.

So if you... just step back as I think the final editors of the prophets do, they see this as a situation in which Israel dies, that is, Israel as it was. It dies, and it comes to life again. Why? Because God is faithful. So all of the books that we have—with the exception of one—all of the books, the prophetic books that we have, even Jonah which is a work of fiction but it basically deals with the exilic situation. Nobody regards... Jonah is a work of... profound... but it's not a... historical report, but, the other prophets are. All of them deal with one phase or other of that huge process that I just mentioned. Micah, for example, deals with the beginning phase. He's a contemporary of First Isaiah. Amos is the first of the prophets, about 750 maybe. Hosea was a little after Amos. They all deal with the beginning of the process. And then in Jeremiah, he's dealing with a little bit more complexity, but it's still the people aren't doing what they should be doing. And Ezekiel is one of those people that talks about the destruction but also talks about the beginning of a renewal. And then, the latter part... chapters 40-55 of Isaiah, talks about the renewal and then the restoration.

But there's one biblical book, there's one biblical prophet that deals with the whole process, not the beginning or the middle or the end. Do you know what that book, that prophetic book is that deals with the whole process? It's Isaiah. First Isaiah... The dates of First Isaiah are something like 738, 734, or something like that, to about 701 and a little beyond, and he is talking about the initial phase. The Assyrians are at the gates. What do you do? So he's talking, you can still convert, but it doesn't look too good right now for you because of the way you're acting. But... some writer who wrote Isaiah 40-66—maybe there's more than one writer, but let's just say one writer—picks it up in about 550 and describes the final phase of this process. And that is "Second" we call it today—a term that actually dates back to, I think, the end of the 18th century—the "Second Isaiah," and then maybe the "Third Isaiah," too. But it makes the... book really the only book that deals with the beginning, the middle, and the end. And that's why Isaiah is so revered in Christian circles; it's the most quoted prophet in the New Testament. And when Augustine... he tells us in the... *Confessions* that when he was just beginning to be a Christian, he went to St. Ambrose, and St. Ambrose said, "Oh, you don't want to read the Gospels. Read the book of Isaiah. That's the... biggest Gospel of them all." And Isaiah, Augustine tells us that he... started to read Isaiah, and he didn't understand what Ambrose was talking about. So... you've got to have a little help.

Prophets as Commentators on God's Work

So...if you look at it in another way, just look at another way of this thing; not only see it as a process, but see... the prophets as commenting on God's work that began about 750 and ended about 500. If you look at it this way, there was a process, a continuous divine process, that first of all announced, unmasked the sin. It...unmasked the evil situation that Israel wasn't aware of. All the while, though, it invited participation and it invited conversion. And... that process used... This is right out [of] Isaiah, chapter 10, and it's also the view of Jeremiah. God used the Assyrian Empire, and then God used the Babylonian Empire to work his purification of Israel. And then, according to Isaiah 40-66, God then used the Persian king, Cyrus, in the same way, but this time not to punish, but to bring the people back. In other words, this is basically Isaiah's theology and it's picked up and accepted by the other prophets, but particularly by Jeremiah and by the Second Isaiah. They saw this... whole process as an actual process, as...God working in history to punish the wrongdoers but also to always offer the opportunity to repent and convert until the process was finished in the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and also the , and the destruction of the traditions, really. And then, once that had come to kind of zero, then God continued the process to rebuild and restore.

So what the prophets are doing is monitoring the situation. In other words, they're interpreting what seems to be random violence—the Assyrians, the violence of Israelite to Israelite, the social

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dislocation that comes when you're really ravaged from outside. Just think of what happens to people in wartime when the whole thing collapses. They're monitoring the situation and they're interpreting it all the while as divinely intended. And they are helping people respond to each phase as it went along.

So...that's what I see the prophets as doing. It's... really a variety of authors who comment upon and interpret for the people that are hearing them or reading them; what is going on in the world. And what is going on in the world is...the word, the word that I like the best for it, is called rectification. Why do I say rectification? Because I think it's a word that we don't use very much, and therefore it can be sort of reserved for this. But what God is doing is rectifying the situation. First, you have the situation of complete unawareness but massive social injustice. Somehow God has to enter into history and rectify that. And how can God do it? God has to use human beings. God doesn't use zapping and supernatural means that... are not human; they're not social. So God uses human beings, such as the Assyrian Empire, such as social dislocation, in order to rectify the situation; but it takes a long time to rectify the situation because people are so obtuse and so resistant to the prophetic prophets. And so I see it... But when finally we hit rock bottom with the destruction of the Temple and of the city and the... exiling of the Davidic king and the wrecking of the traditions, that's when God turns... for that process of rectification now means restoration, return, encouragement, and healing.

The Importance of the Prophets for the New Testament

Now you can see why the prophets, therefore, are so significant for the New Testament. Because what do you have in the New Testament? You have something similar. You have a, a message of God, a messenger of God who undergoes destruction, and what happens to him seems to negate the validity of what he has done. He dies the death of a criminal, and in that culture that means you... didn't have it after all; you were wrong from the beginning. So it helps the... community, the Christian community, to understand that... this is a way of interpreting death, not as the end, but as a prelude to life. And so the prophets can... they help people understand that God can bring life from death.

Jesus: The Eschatological Prophet

Now one of the things that I think is... one of the issues, as you know: *who is Jesus* is a big question here. Everybody... in the world has given his own answer: "he's a wisdom teacher... he just wanted to make people a little wiser than they were." He's been kind of the college professor, without... the pipe. Other people say, "No, He was an eschatological; he was saying the end of the world is coming, and he was mistaken." And then... "We should just forget about him because he thought the end of the world was going to come." So everybody, everybody has an opinion.

But N.T. Wright, and he's joined by a lot of Catholic scholars and a lot of mainstream Protestant scholars, who would say that one important, perhaps the most important way, of interpreting Jesus—and that's why I... gave you this and I recommend it to you to look at—is to interpret him as an eschatological prophet. In other words, to interpret him... by word and deed, interpreting what God is doing now in Israel. And that's basically what the prophets were. Notice the prophets didn't only talk; they acted. Ezekiel is a good example. Ezekiel wanted to show the people that the city that they had such confidence in would soon be destroyed. And so what did he do? He got a little knapsack on his back, and he took some bricks, and he made... a little model of a... city wall. Then he broke down the city wall that was just a few bricks, and he walked through with his little knapsack. So he illustrated by what he did what was going to happen. He said, "This is what's going to happen."

One of the things the prophets did too, is they... anticipated in their own lives what would happen. In other words, Jeremiah was telling the people... *Look at me. Look at my wrecked psychology. Look at my confessions, my laments, where I show, I reveal my inner world of betrayal, of anguish, of pain.*

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Look upon it, not because I want to bear my soul to you (in the modern confessional sense) but because I am offering you a model of what it will be like. And I'm also offering you a model, that even though it's painful, you can make it through. But Isaiah did the same. Isaiah says he went for three years naked—I don't know what that means, but he went through the city. What he was saying is... This city that you think is so grand is going to be destroyed, and you yourselves are going to be... led out naked as a prisoner of war... as you apparently were. And look at me and know that, first of all, that it's going to happen; but know also that if you keep your faith in God, you can survive.

So, the prophets are... pastors really. They're not only theorists who were interpreting what's happening in the world and what's happening in the world of the great empires and what's happening in Israel, but they're also people who, who want to connect to their hearers and show them, both by words and by actions, what they have to do now to respond to this particular phase of the prophetic... of God's Word. So, that's why they've got to do deeds. They've got to... act, and they've got to speak. But we shouldn't see them only as speakers; we should see them as actors.

So what... N.T. Wright does, and... it's in there, is to say, "How do you understand Jesus?" Is he just a wisdom figure? Does he just give you good advice? Or what? And N. T. Wright suggests, (and... he's got loads of excellent biblical scholars—Dan Harrington, Joe Fitzmeyer, Reed, John Donahue, and a huge number of people—who... really do think... that he's got the right... approach on this thing) is to see Jesus as, first of all... like 750-500 is a big turning point in the history of Israel. This is a huge turning point. How do you respond to this huge turning point in the history of Israel? Well you need a prophet. You need somebody who can enact by his life what you need to know and how you... should respond. And then you've got to have somebody interpret it for you.

Jesus as a speaker, we are very familiar with because all of us preach... what Jesus says in our sermons all the time. But we also have to remember that Jesus does something. And what... he does really, in the words of N.T. Wright, is to offer himself as an alternative to the Temple as the location of God's presence. And that's one of the reasons... people ask why was Jesus crucified. And there's a lot of... It's a delicate Jewish/Christian thing because did... the Christians, did... the Jews kill Jesus, or did the Romans, or what? But let that, leave that aside for a moment. But whatever he was crucified for, people had very strong feelings. And N.T. Wright says, "What really brings up strong feelings in anybody?" Well when you play with, or interfere with the great symbols of one's life—you know somebody burns an American flag, or somebody burns a piece of cloth—who cares? But if it's an American flag, it represents something and it's symbolic, and therefore, people's emotions are... affected by it. So also with Jesus and the Temple... If he offers himself as a new authority to replace the Torah in some ways and to replace the Temple as the privileged place of divine/human encounter, that is going to get people really angry. But in the Christian view and in Jesus' view, a time has come in God's dealing with Israel and that time is now, and there are some new things that you must accept. And so that's why, according to Wright, Jesus is a new prophet: because the time has come.

One of the great theologians of Vatican II is a French Dominican named Yves Congar; certainly, some people say the most influential, but one of the most... influential. And... he wrote a book in the 1950's... it's only being translated now. It's called... *True and False Reform* is the... name of the book. And... he says there, "The Church has," he says, "has two great temptations." One he called—you couldn't use these terms today, but I'll just use them here—one is called "the temptation of Judaism," and the other is called "the temptation of Pharisaism." Now we would never use that today because it was really the 1950s. But... the temptation of Judaism is to assume that there are no turning points in the history of God's dealing with his people. In other words, it's just one day after another, things were set, and life goes on a linear path forever. And he thinks that's really a temptation of the Church, not to understand that there are turning points, there are signs of the times, there are times when something new happens. And obviously, one would be the prophets in 750. Something new happens, and therefore you've got to be open to this new thing. He would also say that in the New

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Testament you have to be open to a new thing and that new thing was the presence of Jesus, the... new understanding of divine presence and of... a divine presence and obedience, and so on; the new founding of Israel; Israel's been renewed.

The other temptation of the Church I'll just mention, but... I'm not going to deal with it. It's Pharisaism, where you move what is central to the margin, and you move... what is marginal to the center. In other words, the Church, kind of locally for awhile, kind of misses the point of what's really crucial. That's the other.

But the major one is, I think here, is to assume that the history of God's dealing with the people is a straight line without turning points. And, that means you'd miss... Jesus if you were... Jewish and you had that viewpoint. So... in that case, you can say that Jesus is a prophet because... he is interpreting the work of God in the present world. And he is talking about God's energy, God's directing history even though we cannot see it, and so on. He's talking about that, and you've got to be alert to it. And the prophet is the one who tells you what's going on, but more than that, tells you how to respond, and even in a certain sense in his own life models how to respond.

Implications for Preaching

The Tasks of the Preacher

In the question of social justice, it seems to me that the... preacher, to come... nearer to the topic of our meeting today, that... one of the tasks of the preacher is to understand the... work of God, the energy in the world that's kind of directing things, and to be able to point it out to people, to help people respond to it. And there may be times when it requires one response and times when it requires another, the response of acceptance, the response of allowing God to build, the response of allowing God to destroy, in order to have more life to come. But... it's really kind of monitoring a process that is ongoing forever, and I think that's one of the ways in which one can understand preaching. And so, preaching is... not only exhortation and helping people understand their personal lives, but there's an element of trying to locate what's happening.

Today's Signs of the Times

To me it is also like signs of the times. What are some of the signs of the times to me? Well one of them is certainly the biblical movement: helping the number of Catholics now who... have grown familiar with the Bible and find it an enriching thing.

I think the place of women in the Church, as we are helping women to find their place in a way that really is productive for the Church and productive for them.

I think lay ecclesial ministry, there's a tremendous rise [of it] in Catholicism. How do you... interpret that? How do you help people see what's important?

I think the sensitivity among Catholics, particularly now among social justice, and the question of minorities in the United States and elsewhere—helping to see where that's going, what it means, how do we respond in a way that's faithful to the tradition.

And the question of the distribution of wealth and gifts. Should... not all people have access to decent... human life? Is it right that a huge amount of wealth is... hoarded by a small number of people? (And so on.) These are the issues that I think we know from the Gospel and we know from the Old Testament, an understanding of God's desire that all people be sated. That is, all people have plenty—more than enough—put it that way; all people have more than enough. But those things are going to be important, and therefore we should be monitoring how that happens. And that's why I

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think... to me, to be able to do some of those things would, I think, be really preaching social justice. And it's preaching justice, because I think the temptation for all preachers, including most of all myself, is to keep it personal and private rather than to, at least sometimes, to point to the work of God in the world that's going to be triumphant no matter what people do. And it's going to... come to its appointed end whether we... like it or not. It's going to, God's world, God's will is going to... overcome human resistance and entrenched evil.

Now, spend a few moments reflecting on the questions below.

[Questions from web page]

- What is most compelling to you in this presentation about having a justice dimension to your preaching?
- What is most challenging to you in this presentation? How will you work on this challenge?