

Jesus, Blessed Savior, Help Us Now to Raise

Frances R. Havergal (1836–1879)

Jesus, blessed Savior, help us now to raise
Songs of glad thanksgiving, songs of holy praise.
Oh, how kind and gracious Thou hast always been!
Oh, how many blessings every day has seen!
Jesus, blessed Savior, now our praises hear,
For Thy grace and favor crowning all the year.

Jesus, holy Savior, only Thou canst tell
How we often stumbled, how we often fell!
All our sins (so many!) Savior, Thou dost know:
In Thy blood most precious wash us white as snow.
Jesus, blessed Savior, keep us in Thy fear,
Let Thy grace and favor pardon all the year.

Jesus, loving Savior, only Thou dost know
All that may befall us as we onward go;
So we humbly pray Thee, take us by the hand,
Lead us ever upward to the better land.
Jesus, blessed Savior, keep us ever near,
Let Thy grace and favor shield us all the year.

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ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Preaching Holidays

Kevin T. Bauder

In the past, most Christian churches employed a calendar that focused on events from biblical and Christian history. This calendar is sometimes called the *liturgical calendar*, meaning that it is a calendar that regulates worship. About half the liturgical calendar is “ordinary time,” or time that observes no designated events, while the rest of the calendar revolves around historical occurrences.

Advent, Christmas, and Easter are all important times in the liturgical calendar. Other dates include Epiphany and Pentecost. Many churches have observed Allhallowstide (including All Hallows Eve, All Saints Day, and All Souls Day). Some churches observe Lent, a weeks-long fast that begins with Ash Wednesday and terminates with Easter. Most churches observe Palm Sunday to commemorate Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. In liturgical churches, the palm fronds from Palm Sunday are saved to burn for the ashes that are used on Ash Wednesday. Some churches also include anniversaries of significant Christians’ births or deaths.

Many evangelical churches employ a different calendar to regulate their worship. It could be called the *Hallmark calendar*. It typically has two dates in common with the liturgical calendar: Christmas and Easter. Otherwise, it follows a sequence of civic or social celebrations. For example, the Hallmark calendar includes Mother’s Day and Father’s Day. In the United States it will include Sundays adjacent to Memorial Day, Independence Day, and Veterans Day. And it always includes Thanksgiving.

Some churches combine the two calendars. They retain certain dates from the liturgical calendar while adding some dates from the Hallmark calendar. Such churches typically celebrate Thanksgiving as well as Christmas and Easter. They have at least one patriotic service each year, usually around the Fourth of July (though they may also observe Memorial Day, Veteran’s Day, or Patriot Day). They generally recognize Mother’s Day and Father’s Day. They probably set aside a service for New Year’s Day. A few also observe Reformation Day near October 31.

Whichever calendar a church chooses presents a problem for expository preachers. Normally, an expository preacher aims to preach through entire



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books of the Bible over a process of weeks or months. If the text is allowed to shape the church's services (which it should), then the rhythm of the services follows the development of the biblical writings. This rhythm is interrupted if the pastor breaks out of an expository series to focus on special days from whichever calendar. Enough of these interruptions can have a disruptive effect on the entire series.

Some pastors have tried to solve this problem by ignoring the special days and by continuing their expository preaching without interruption. I have tried that approach myself. But it feels odd to ignore holidays from the pulpit, especially if (as with Christmas and Easter) other aspects of the service tend to follow the holiday. Most of our churches still sing carols at Christmastide, and we sing resurrection hymns at Easter. If our preaching ignores those days, it can feel like an intrusion into the rest of the service.

Furthermore, some holidays are truly important. The point of Christmas is not tinsel and eggnog. It is the Incarnation of the Messiah. The point of Easter is not lilies and bunnies. It is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. These holidays are celebrations of central doctrines, and they lend themselves to preaching those doctrines. These holidays provide opportunities to explore truths that we ought to be emphasizing continuously. Christmas is a good time to explore the doctrine of the Trinity. Easter is a good time to explore the meaning of the atonement.

As I have grown older in ministry, my preaching has shifted in the direction of recognizing at least some of the holidays. I first began to preach deliberately on the Incarnation during the weeks leading up to Christmas. Then I began to focus on the resurrection of Jesus at Eastertide. As I matured, preaching about the nature of God's kingdom became more important to me, with Palm Sunday providing an opportunity to emphasize that theme. It is possible to preach expository messages from texts dealing with these topics, which is what I aim to do.

I also take advantage of some of the Hallmark calendar. For example, Thanksgiving Day is a cultural and civic holiday. But the giving of thanks is one of our most fundamental Christian duties, and it is one that many of our people neglect. Consequently, on the Sunday before Thanksgiving, I usually expound some text related to gratitude.

A younger version of me would be surprised to see me preaching Mother's Day and Father's Day sermons. But a younger version of me never guessed at the gender confusion that would someday sweep through our culture. That confusion must be addressed, and it must be addressed publicly. These days provide a seasonable time for doing that.

What about patriotic holidays, like Memorial Day, Independence Day, or Veterans Day? As a minister of the gospel, I am not willing to devote a service to worshipping a nation, however exceptional that nation may be. But

patriotic holidays do provide an opportunity to discuss the legitimate role of government. They also allow me to answer questions about how believers ought to relate to civil authorities.

Far from being distractions, these digressions usually help whatever expository series I may be preaching. After being immersed in one book of the Bible for several weeks, this kind of holiday preaching allows people to catch their breath. When I plunge back into book expositions, the congregation is more ready to take that plunge with me.

Should we preach holidays? A faithful pastor ought to be teaching his congregation by preaching through books of the Bible. That should be the regular pattern. But there can be room for brief excursions into other matters. Holiday preaching can provide some of those excursions. If you are still preaching through your book series during the holidays, you are not doing anything wrong. Your preaching will be a blessing to your people. For myself, however, I have discovered that it is more useful to work with the major holidays than to work against them.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
