

Preaching as God's event

Paul Scott Wilson

In hearing the best sermons, people experience renewed hope, enlivened faith, and deepened commitment to mission: they experience God. In preaching at its best, a congregation meets the living God, and people are moved by God's transforming power in a moment in time. More, it is a divine event, because through preaching God chooses to be encountered—or rather, God encounters the listener in words of saving power. A sermon,

In preaching at its best, a congregation meets the living God, and people are moved by God's transforming power. Still, many popular ways we conceive of preaching aim at far less than meeting God.

at least insofar as it fulfills Christ's mandate to preach the gospel, is thus a salvation event.

Still, many popular ways we conceive of preaching aim at far less than meeting God in an event or a happening; they fall short of seeking to embody an active relationship or communication with God. As preachers, we can preach the Bible (that is, we can preach the history of the text or its literary meaning) and not get to the Word of God. We can preach the Word of God and not get to the gospel. We can even preach grace and not get

to the gospel. And we can teach the gospel and still not proclaim it in a way that aids believers' encounter with God in transforming power.

Where is the good news in our preaching?

Given all the human and financial resources devoted to biblical studies in denominational seminaries and the church at large, one might legitimately expect ours to be a golden age of preaching. Yet it does not seem to be. Preaching has become more sound exegetically and more contextual theologically. Preachers are better teachers of Bible texts; they employ a wider range of sermon forms than were available fifty years ago; they adapt their

approaches to how people hear in a pluralistic, multimedia age; and for the most part, they engage contemporary life.

But have preachers in the last half century improved in their ability to discern and communicate the gospel? I have certainly worshiped in congregations where the gospel is the focus of preaching, and I have come away with wondrously renewed faith and hope and a sense that I have encountered God. But in general, the answer is probably no—the last fifty years have seen little improvement in preachers' ability to proclaim the gospel.

I recently worshiped in two churches, of contrasting theological traditions. Both sermons used the same Bible text. In both services, the sermon provided a worthy treatment of the scripture reading. Both preachers lifted up the historical background of the text, told engaging contemporary stories, and named social needs. But apart from the preachers' own positive attitude about what the listeners could accomplish, they offered the congregation no hope. Where was the gospel?

The identity of God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit is central. The Christ event occurred at a particular time and place in history, and the same event, centering on the cross and resurrection, can encounter us in and through preaching now. Thus we may speak of the sermon as God's ongoing self-giving, through which human sin is called to account, condemned, and countered by a reconciling love stronger than death itself.

A minimal requirement of the gospel is that it be good news. Generally it also ought to sound like and be experienced as good news. From a theological perspective, hearing what people are required to do is trouble and death to us, not good news. Paul says, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Rom. 7:19). If we could do what is required of us before God, we would need no saviour.

Most published sermons in recent decades display a common ailment: Up to half contain no good news. Less than a third contain substantial good news of more than a sentence or two, and rarely do the good news and its implications amount to even a fifth of the total length. Hope is preached generally only if the biblical text is hopeful (the lost is found, for example). What is more telling, preachers preach about even hopeful texts as trouble.

Attention to hope and focus on God are minimal requirements for preaching the gospel, yet some preachers resist even this. They say that to focus this way in every sermon reduces the Bible to a single teaching, the doctrine of redemption. By contrast, one could say in response, what a preacher teaches about faith and life in preaching is far-ranging. Paying attention to a hopeful message overall does not limit us, for the appropriate thematic subjects of preaching arise as we engage biblical texts week by week, year by year. The subjects and doctrines vary according to the texts. Hope should not be the theme of every sermon, any more than the sun is the theme of all daytime conversations. Hope is simply the tenor of the gospel, an indicator that God is still faithful, sovereign, and in control.

Textbooks on preaching are in the same infirmary wards that sermons occupy. (Perhaps that is no surprise.) Rarely, even on the evangelical side, do they discuss the nature of the gospel or focus the sermon on God and human life before God. Rather, the biblical text is the focus, and explication of what people are to do is the main goal. Perhaps the importance of teaching introductory students essential historical-critical exegesis has led teachers of preaching to be silent about the weaknesses of this approach. Many teachers of Bible and homiletics may agree on what the

Sermons often do less to offer a window through which to see the realm of God and more to provide a mirror that reflects life as it is commonly lived. Apparently we still live in the old creation.

gospel is, and they may in fact preach it, but in their sermon method, most do not include clear teaching about why or how students can do the same.

Sermons lack hope either because they are anthropocentric, focusing on human actions, or because they focus on sin and injustice and what God requires. They do less to offer a window through which to see the realm of God and more to provide a mirror that reflects life as it is commonly lived. What God has accomplished in Jesus Christ and

through the Holy Spirit seems to mean little; apparently we still live in the old creation. If the shadow of the cross falls over pews during the sermon, it often does so without any of the dawning of a new creation in Christ that preaching is said to effect.

What is the gospel?

The gospel is the word that takes account of the sin and brokenness of the world. At a minimum, it is the saving, liberating, and empowering action of God found anywhere in the Bible (Isaiah 52:7 and 61:1–3 speak directly of good news), which have their fullest expression in the incarnation of Jesus Christ; in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension; in the gift of the Spirit; and in the fulfillment of all God's promises at the end of time. The gospel is the reason the church preaches. Christ commissioned the church's proclamation, and this gospel is the subject of the entire New Testament. Even the moral offerings of the letter of James, which Luther dismissed as a right strawy epistle for seeming to promote works righteousness, tells us something about the nature of God through the tasks Christians are to engage in. Arguably, apart from the gospel, the church has little to offer the world.

In our postmodern age, some people resist gospel in the singular, perhaps lest they sound like fundamentalist television evangelists. Still, the Bible indicates that the gospel has some consistent content. Most references in the Bible are to "the gospel." Paul speaks of "my gospel" (Rom. 2:16; 16:25; 2 Tim. 2:8), "our gospel" (2 Cor. 4:3), and "a different gospel" (2 Cor. 11:4; Gal. 1:6), adding "not that there is another gospel" (Gal. 1:7), although he refers to "a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you" (Gal. 1:8). Whatever else we may say, cross and resurrection are central for Paul, "for Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, . . . so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power" (1 Cor. 1:17); "but we proclaim Christ crucified" (1 Cor 1:23).

Over lunch I asked a friend how intentional she is about preaching the gospel. "Not very," she answered. "I try to present Jesus in such a way that someone listening might be drawn to know him better." I suspect that is how I have often preached. But if we preach the miracles of Jesus, for example, without clarifying his decisive identity as Messiah, Son of God, through whom God's reign breaks into human existence, I wonder whether newcomers or seekers won't see him much as they would view a comic book superhero or an action figure.

Is the gospel something to preach only when a biblical text offers it? Were that our guide, we would never mention the cross

and resurrection in connection with the Old Testament; we would sometimes mention it in connection with the Epistles and Revelation, and in connection with the Gospels—mainly as often as we preach from their final chapters. If Christ really is the cornerstone, this way of thinking is flawed. Were the Bible reduced to only those texts that speak directly of the gospel, it would be a thin book.

What can we learn about preaching from forebears in the faith?

How one determines what gospel is, is a function of how one reads the Bible. Christians for centuries read with a view to how the

The classic creeds confess Christ and summarize the gospel, as do many hymns and prayers. In so doing, they interpret scripture. Faith summaries and scripture mutually instruct, restrain, and affirm one another.

entire Paschal mystery illuminates and is illuminated by individual biblical texts. The classic creeds of the church confess Christ and summarize the gospel, as do many hymns and prayers. In so doing, they interpret scripture. Faith summaries and scripture mutually instruct, restrain, and affirm one another. Compared with modern interpreters, the Reformers had better understanding of the unity of scripture. The Testaments read each other; the creation accounts in Genesis and the passages about new creation in Revelation refer to one another and offer perspectives

on all books in between. The beginning and end of each Gospel inform all its chapters, and vice versa.

The new homiletic of the last five decades followed biblical studies perhaps too closely in treating Bible texts as isolatable objects of historical interest. Historical and literary criticism are essential tools in sermon preparation, yet they fail the basic test of a hermeneutical method: they cannot account for how texts function as revelation. We need to be able to account for how the Bible functions as the Word of God.

Our preaching forebears were generally much better than we are at proclaiming the gospel. Their understandings of a preaching text differed from ours: a text typically was any verse or portion thereof that led to a doctrine that the sermon developed, freely referencing as many other texts as came to mind. For all their faults in using proof texts, allegorizing, and failing to deal with

texts contextually, they nonetheless had an expansive notion that the text for preaching is also ultimately the whole of scripture. The preacher should not be limited to the particular passage at hand. For preachers in centuries past, the cross and resurrection at the heart of the gospel were relevant to every text.

Were preachers from history to speak, they might readily name what is wrong with the new homiletic. In spite of its focus on the Bible, it lacks focus on God and on the gospel in particular. It allows historical and literary criticism to render biblical texts without an accompanying theological and hermeneutical strategy that permits these texts to speak to and from the heart of the faith. It encourages preachers to preach texts—by which is meant pericopes or units of scripture—rather than asking us to see texts as essential instruments in and through which we are to proclaim the gospel.

How can we recover the gospel for the pulpit?

What might be needed if we are to recover the gospel for the pulpit? Perhaps we need to reconceive the whole homiletical enterprise. The gospel is not just a few sentences sprinkled through a sermon like pepper on soup. Students need to be taught not only how to safeguard biblical texts using historical-critical exegesis, but also how to do supplementary theological exegesis that recovers the texts as scripture for the church.

Since the Reformation, the church has affirmed the literal sense of scripture as the only sense, yet our idea of a literal sense was not the Reformers' idea. They maintained a double-literal notion: the lower of these is the grammatical-historical sense (which is close to our conception), and the higher is the divinely intended meaning. For Luther the second sense was the meaning of a text in relationship to Christ; similarly, for Calvin it was the meaning revealed through the Holy Spirit. The church until the last century has generally upheld a God sense of texts, which has allowed believers to read the Bible theologically as the church's book, as scripture. We need to recover something of this conviction. We need to become capable of asking, with a view to the larger picture, what God is doing in or behind any particular text.

Form, function, and effect are related; thus sermons might adopt the shape and movement of the gospel. The gospel is not

just ideas. It has plot, moving from exodus to the promised land, from crucifixion to resurrection, from old to new creation. The movement is not back and forth, or in reverse (although in scripture countering movements do exist as the movements of sin). It is hard to conceive of a sermon ending in judgment or law, that at the same time communicates a lasting impression of the gospel. The gospel transforms even the mission of listeners from a must, should, and have-to duty to an invitation to meet the risen Christ in our places of need.

The Word of God is not necessarily gospel, for God also judges and condemns. Emil Brunner said that Christ meets us in the law, but not as himself. Even grace, understood as God's empowering action, is not gospel. However, grace points to gospel. It provides a lookout in the direction of the cross, to determine how a particular text's meaning is altered or fulfilled in it, or to find the gospel within the text through echoes of the larger Christian story.

Another approach our forebears used was an art that our age has mostly lost: the art of proclamation. Our age thinks of proclamation as a synonym for preaching. History indicates that preachers were skilled in two key arts: teaching and proclamation. The

The new hermeneutic allows historical and literary criticism to render biblical texts without a theological and hermeneutical strategy that permits these texts to speak to and from the heart of the faith.

former is the necessary sermonic precondition for the latter, and it arises directly out of the engagement of the biblical text with the world and theology. Proclamation arises out of the intersection of these elements with the heart of the gospel. Through proclamation, we hear God's words of empowerment for ministry, and we receive them as direct from God: "I love you." "You are forgiven." "I will never let you go." When God's actions of grace are in focus, individual preaching texts lead to loving and saving words that echo through the Bible. Proclamation actualizes

the kerygma; it does the gospel to the people. In it, people meet the living Christ, who died and rose for us. They do not just hear ideas about him; they encounter him in the power of the Spirit, and the results are transforming.

Augustine identified a plain style of preaching that informs. He called it teaching. Most preaching today is plain-style teaching

that stops short of proclamation. (A significant exception is found in many African American and some southern churches.) Augustine also spoke of the moderate and grand styles that delight and persuade; they also are mostly foreign to us. They were easier to distinguish in his culture and in spoken Latin. Still, even on the pages of sermons throughout the ages one can find passages that have shorter phrases, that center on the gospel, that are spoken with greater energy and passion, that arise out of teaching the gospel, and that we can identify as proclamation. If we could train our eyes to spot such passages, how we approach old sermons might change. We might go to them with a sense of adventure and readiness to be taught. We might even learn to proclaim again. In this age of critical church decline, churches are experimenting with ways to stem the loss. A novel approach might be for us preachers to try proclaiming the gospel.

Of course, all of this depends on whether we see the sermon as God's event, as more than a talk inspired by the Bible about social and spiritual ills. It involves our doing what most of us preachers have been doing with biblical texts: responsible biblical research and teaching. It also involves going beyond this to reclaim teaching and proclaiming the gospel as our purpose in preaching. If our churches are to flourish, preachers each Sunday may need to allow God to speak the words of love and liberation that come from the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ and from the promises of our loving God.

About the author

Paul Scott Wilson is professor of homiletics at Emmanuel College, University of Toronto, and the author of various books, including *The Practice of Preaching*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), and *Setting Words on Fire: Putting God at the Center of the Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008).