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Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology

Preaching

Editorial

Dan Epp-Tiessen

Ezekiel's dry bones vision (37:1–14) serves as a parable about the power of preaching. The prophet is plunked down into the middle of the killing fields, amid bones of once-living human beings which the scavengers, blazing sun, and the passage of time have rendered very dry. The bewildered Ezekiel is commanded to prophesy into this tragic situation, and when he obeys, the bones start to rattle and move, re-forming skeletons. Flesh and sinews appear and bodies re-form, but they remain corpses, awaiting life-giving breath. Ezekiel is commanded to prophesy a second time, and as he does, the *ruach* (breath/wind/spirit) enters the bodies, and they stand "on their feet, a vast multitude." God then declares that these bones represent the people of Israel: their death is the hopelessness and despair of exile, and their resurrection will entail restoration to the land and their renewal as God's people.

Skeletons and bodies re-form and corpses are restored to life only when Ezekiel prophesies. God uses the prophetic word to unleash the power of resurrection into the community of faith.

In this story God is the one who resurrects and heals Israel. A God capable of raising the dead hardly needs assistance from a bewildered prophet, but that is not how the story is told. Skeletons and bodies re-form and corpses are restored to life only when Ezekiel prophesies. God uses the prophetic word to unleash the power of resurrection into the community of faith. After the dry bones are resurrected, God commands Ezekiel to prophesy a third time, this time to the Jewish exiles in Babylon. Ezekiel's prophecy is the life-giving word that renews flickering faith, empowering exiles to hope for and thereby already participate in God's renewal and restoration.

There is sound biblical foundation for a theme that runs through this issue of *Vision*: that God chooses to work through preaching. Like the words of Ezekiel, our preaching may facilitate

an encounter with the living God and may unleash the power of resurrection into this world. The two lead articles by Allan Rudy-Froese and Paul Scott Wilson both make such claims by asserting that effective and faithful preaching doesn't just say things; it does things—and what it does is the gospel. Therefore, preachers ought to prepare sermons and preach so as to proclaim and facilitate this happening of the gospel.

Thomas Long reflects on the preacher's role as a vigilant witness, ever attentive to the presence of God in ordinary life, who then boldly testifies to the truth of God's presence with us, so that even a New York diner at 4:00 a.m. becomes a theatre of the glory of God. Long touches briefly on the image of the preacher as the witness whom the congregation sends to scripture on its behalf to discern how God encounters us there, and who returns to testify about this life-changing encounter (surely an Anabaptist theology of preaching, if there ever was one).[1]

Ryan Ahlgrim explores ways preachers can move from biblical text to sermon, empowering them to testify so that God's Spirit will pull us up by the hairs of our heads! June Alliman Yoder pleads with the church to keep preaching at the center of its worship, because—in contrast to other elements of worship, in which we address God—through scripture reading and preaching, the tables are turned and God addresses us. Renee Sauder and Michele Hershberger both advocate creative ways to testify effectively so that the gospel is heard, understood, and experienced. Sermons by Michele Rizoli and Dan Epp-Tiessen seek to model such creative ways of doing the gospel. John H. Neufeld reflects on how preaching does the gospel by equipping believers to cope with life's inevitable crises, so that they might experience life to the full. Drawing insights from African American tradition, Dennis Edwards reminds us that if preaching is to be transformative, it must invite concrete responses from the hearers. Finally, Don Rempel Boschman shares wisdom for maintaining a fresh and vital preaching ministry in a long pastorate.

May this issue of *Vision* inspire preaching that God uses to resurrect dry bones.

Note

[1] For a much fuller discussion, see Long's preaching textbook, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 45–51.

The preached sermon as a happening of the gospel

Allan Rudy-Froese

Once in a while a friend or church member asks me, "So, what's your sermon about this week?" I usually respond with some comment about the content of my sermon. I speak about the theme of the sermon, the biblical text I am working with, or perhaps some new information or an insight that has inspired me. While I enjoy answering this question, I usually feel that my response addresses only one aspect of the Sunday morning sermon.

A sermon that is clear only on content but pays no attention to what it is doing will probably sound like an essay. A sermon that pays attention to what it is doing but with little regard to content will lack biblical and theological depth.

What is your sermon about? It's a good question, and all week it should be in the mind and heart of the preacher. In the question, the word *about* refers to the content of the sermon. Like any other communicator, the preacher needs to be clear on content. Many preaching manuals suggest that the question, what is your sermon about? is crucial, and you should be able to answer it in one simple sentence. This "about" sentence may or may not be audibly present in the sermon, but it is in front of the preacher as she prepares and preaches. The sentence can be simple: This sermon is about Sarah's laughter at the good—and ridiculous—news of her pregnancy. A clear sentence on what the sermon is about has a way of anchoring both the study process and the preaching moment.

What is happening in your sermon?

While the about question is crucial, another question people should ask preachers is, what is your sermon doing? This is the other side of the about question. The question, what is your sermon about? gets at content; what is your sermon doing? gets at

what is happening—or what is supposed to happen—in the preached sermon. Here we leave the world of nouns and enter the world of verbs and participles. Just as a preacher should have a clear sentence with a strong verb at the centre, that spells out what the sermon is about, he should also have a clear sentence that anchors what the sermon is doing.

Thomas Long invites the preacher, after a close reading of the text, to construct two sentences that anchor the sermon: a focus sentence and a function sentence.[1] If the focus of the sermon is God's news and Sarah's laugher, what might be the function of this sermon? Think verbs here. Do you want to encourage? Or is the goal of this sermon to challenge? to invite? to surprise? to inspire?

The structure of the three-point sermon tended to suggest that Christian faith could best be summarized in static propositions. It was *about* God, *about* the gospel, but it was not necessarily an experience of God and the gospel.

The setting of the sermon may be decisive when it comes to finding the right verb. If this setting is a funeral, perhaps the main function of our Sarah sermon may be to comfort those who are grieving their loss. Another time, this Sarah sermon might make people laugh about the ridiculous ways God enters our lives.

In the end, what the sermon is about and what it is doing need to be joined. A sermon that is clear only on content but pays no attention to what it is doing will probably sound like an essay or a report. On the other hand, a sermon that pays attention to what it is doing but with little regard to content will lack biblical and theological depth and may produce some warm fuzzy feelings that lack staying power.

The sermon as a happening: A brief history

The issue of what is happening in the preached sermon is a major theme that has dominated homiletics in North America in the last fifty years. One of the first to ask what the Protestant sermon in the twentieth century was doing was H. Grady Davis. Dissatisfied with the traditional three-point sermon, he was concerned about the shape and movement of the sermon in connection with its content. In *Design for Preaching*, Davis is constantly asking classic questions of rhetoric: what is this illustration, this sentence, this paragraph doing in this sermon? Does it need to be there? If the

biblical text one is preaching from is, for instance, a narrative, why would the sermon be organized as an essay with one argument following another?

Thinking way outside the box for his day—where the sermon was seen as a kind of argumentative essay—Davis likened the sermon to a tree with interconnected roots, a trunk, branches, and leaves. In form and content, he argued, the sermon needs to grow out of the biblical text and retain the text's intention, meaning, and happening as the sermon is preached. *Design for Preaching* is often lauded as the beginning of the "new homiletic." This paradigm shift in preaching had its beginnings, in part, in Davis's insistence that the sermon is not fundamentally words on a page but rather a happening that grows out of the biblical text and finds a hearing in the preacher and the listener.[2]

One of the first offspring of the new homiletic was narrative preaching, which continues to live and acquire new forms even today. The three-point sermon and its concluding poem may have been thorough on the content side, but what was it doing? What it was doing, in fact, was boring congregations—a good swath of Protestant churches—to death. More than this, though, the three-point sermon tended, because of its structure, to suggest that Christian faith could best be summarized in static propositions. It also tended to be a head game. It was *about* God, *about* the gospel, or even *about* transformation, but it was not necessarily an experience of God and the transformative gospel.

The narrative turn in preaching would not leave out content but would concentrate on experience, on what is happening as the plot or story unfolds in the minds and hearts of listeners. In short, the narrative or inductive sermon would not simply define the content of the gospel; it would *do* the gospel. Lowry's loop, Craddock's inductive move to the Aha!, Jensen's story, Buttrick's moves, and Wilson's pages—just to name a few—encourage various types of narrative movement in the preached sermon, allowing the sermon to be a happening of the gospel.[3]

A happening—of the gospel

A preached sermon at its best is a happening not of just anything but of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel *has* content and *is* an event. The word *gospel* can be defined in a multitude of ways, but

let's try this: gospel is a noun referring to the saving acts of God in creation, Torah, God's people, and especially in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. But the content of the gospel is only one of its aspects. The gospel also *does* something to people and communities; it performs something in us and for us. Paul says it is the power of God for salvation (Rom. 1:16). The gospel is not just content; it is also a power, a dynamic, a happening.

The new homiletic's concentration on eventfulness—as seen in the narrative sermon—is not just a rhetorical move. At its inception, people lauded narrative preaching not just because they liked stories and could finally stand to listen to the preacher. It is more complex than this. The narrative sermon came out of a mid-twentieth-century biblical, theological, linguistic, and philosophical paradigm shift that had the gospel at its centre. The wave the new homiletic was riding was a movement called the new hermeneutic, which, in its theological form, emphasized the Word of God not as static but as performative, the kergyma not only as information but as transformative, the gospel not simply as content but also as power. In sum, narrative preaching became popular not only because people like stories. Narrative preaching has its roots in a recovery of the saving and performative acts of God captured in dynamic concepts such as Word, kergyma, and gospel.[4]

In sum, preaching the content of the gospel on a Sunday morning is only one aspect of a sermon. A sermon—even if it is *about* God or Jesus—that does not have a clear sense of what it is *doing* is not a sermon in the best sense, because it is not a happening of the gospel. Nor is it enough to add happenings to a sermon, in the form of cute illustrations or stories, in order to give people an experience. The goal of preaching is not just any experience or happening. The sermon is made up of what it is about and what it is doing, but it is not really a sermon until in the moment of preaching the gospel happens.

Steps toward making the sermon a happening of God's grace

How does our preaching become a gospel event? As noted above, we need clarity about the content and the main verb or verbs of the sermon. Beyond this, a few other steps can move us toward sermons our congregations may experience as gospel happenings.

Get the essay model out of your head. The preached sermon is its own genre. A sermon is not an essay. In some ways, it resembles an essay and a story, a movie and a lecture, a comedy sketch and a sales pitch, but a sermon is its own genre. What is more, writing and speaking are different skills, just as reading and listening are different experiences. An analysis of good speeches, sermons, and lectures reveals that the sentences are generally shorter than in written prose. These oral forms rely on active verbs, keep adjectival description to a minimum, and use repetition. Many good books provide instruction in oral communication for those who have been schooled for decades in essay writing. These resources can help you write for the ear instead of the eye.[5]

Bring your voice and body to the happening of the gospel. Preaching has a performative aspect that requires body, voice, spirit, and mind working in concert. If we are serious about making the gospel happen in preaching, we need to communicate with our voices and bodies as well as with words. I am not talking about being over-the-top dramatic. Rather I am simply noting that preachers need to be aware of what our voices and bodies are doing as we make the gospel happen. Is your body doing something that detracts from the main verb that characterizes your sermon? The sermon that was supposed to comfort may be received as judging if you wag your finger in unconscious imitation of a parent scolding a naughty child. Enrol in an acting class. It can enhance your ability to bring congruence of mind, body, and voice to your preaching.

The narrative sermon as a happening is not simply a rhetorical move that will help listeners pay attention; it has its roots in a recovery of the saving and performative acts of God.

As you prepare your sermon, pay attention to your Aha! moments. One school of thought suggests that our Aha! moments during sermon study are our best clues to how we can make room for the gospel to happen in the preached sermon. In the sermon, we might be able to retrace the steps we took to get to our Aha![6] Our gospel moments are not necessarily emotional happenings—although they may be just that. It could be that in our study we have gone through a paradigm shift of the right or left brain variety; perhaps a new insight seems to bring together the text,

the church, and a situation in the church. Any of these experiences is a clue to what the happening of the gospel may be for that sermon.

Spend time with the good news in your sermon. As preachers, we are prone to want to impress the congregation with everything but the good news. A sermon that spends most of its time diagnosing social or personal ills, giving historical-critical background to the text, or spinning an unrelated story can limit the time we can devote to naming the good news we have discovered. Paul Wilson suggests that at least 50 percent of the sermon should be proclamation of the good news.[7] Although it may feel wooden at first, this is an excellent exercise. It is hard, risky, and requires a holy imagination to name what God is doing in the world. Nonetheless, preaching the gospel with its accompanying hope, promise, and renewal is what the preacher is called to do.

Look for what is happening in the biblical text, not for the point of the text. True, we often must choose one incident, image, or line of a text to dwell on in the sermon, and our focus sentence may name a truth of the text. Nonetheless, it is always good to see the incident or line that we have chosen in its dynamic and dramatic context. What happened before and after this incident or line? What is God doing here to bring the community or the individual from slavery to liberation, from sin to salvation, from despair to hope, from exile to home? In other words, what is the event or happening of the gospel that looms large for you this week, which you can carry with you into the pulpit?[8]

Work through the reality that you are speaking for God in your sermon. Nearly every Christian tradition and every generation of preachers must somehow tackle the paradoxical reality that sinful humans can—humbly, but with conviction—voice God's good news. Many Anabaptist-Mennonite churches have shifted from sometimes autocratic and patriarchal preaching to informal sermons that resemble sharing time. Neither extreme makes much room for a happening of the gospel. Somewhere in the middle is a place where the preacher has been called and given authority to speak in ways that allow the gospel to happen in our worship. John Calvin argued that the Spirit uses our frail words to speak the gospel to those who are present. In other words, we do have work to do, but the Spirit is also living, mov-

ing, and making things happen as we do our work of preparing and preaching.[9]

Remember that the gospel is a happening. What is your sermon about this week, and what is it doing? What do you want it to do? You are speaking of an event not only of Bible times and places; the gospel is also present in every place and every moment when God is breaking into our reality. God has made Sarah laugh. She is laughing back there in ancient Canaan but also in Kitchener and in Santiago. God is bringing good news here, now, and always. Take a risk and tell us about it. But don't just tell us; show us. Introduce us again to the God who makes good news happen.

Notes

[1] Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 86–91.
[2] See H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958).
[3] For a good summary of and bibliographic information about Fred Craddock, Eugene Lowry, David Buttrick, Paul Scott Wilson, and other key figures in the new homiletic, see Richard Eslinger, *The Web of Preaching: New Options in Homiletic Method* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002). The latest assessment of narrative preaching is *What's the Shape of Narrative Preaching? Essays in Honor of Eugene L. Lowry* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008), edited by Mike Graves and David J. Schlafer. Also fresh off the press is Paul Scott Wilson, ed., *The New Interpreter's Handbook of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008); in it some two hundred brief articles—centering mostly on current issues—address virtually every aspect of preaching.
[4] To get a handle on how the new hermeneutic contributed to the new homiletic, see these articles in *The New Interpreter's Handbook of Preaching:* "New Homiletic," by Paul Scott Wilson (398–401); and "Hermeneutics," by Stephen Farris (31–37).
[5] See, for example, G. Robert Jacks, *Just Say the Word: Writing for the Ear* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), esp. 92–95. A new book on the performative nature of the sermon is *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), edited by Jana Childers and Clayton J. Schmit.
[6] On the issue of making the Aha! happen for the listener, see anything by Fred Craddock. A good place to start might be *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985).
[7] Paul Scott Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989). See especially the section on "page four."
[8] To learn how to see movement or event in a text, rather than just seeing "the point," read David Buttrick. As a starting place, go to www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/interviews/buttrick.asp.
[9] Karl Barth does a fine job of highlighting the paradox of the preaching life; see Karl Barth, *Homiletics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1971).

About the author

Allan Rudy-Froese is an interim minister at Wellesley (Ontario) Mennonite Church and is completing his PhD in homiletics at Toronto School of Theology.

Can I get a witness?

Thomas G. Long

It was 4:00 a.m. on a Saturday, three weeks before Christmas, and I was leaning against the counter of a diner on 8th Avenue in New York City. Always the early riser, I had roused myself out of my hotel bed and stumbled out into the December cold in search of a first strong cup of coffee. "Open 24 Hours" promised the neon sign glowing through the steamed-over window, and I pushed my way into the light and warmth.

The short, cheerful man behind the counter pulled the handle on the urn. "Do you wan' some milk?" he asked, a soft sea wind off the Aegean wafting through his accent. I shook my head. "How 'bout sugar?" Again, no. He put the coffee on the counter and deftly pressed a plastic lid into place. "So . . . what? . . . Do you wanna bag?"

Christianity insists that the deepest truths are not to be found "in here" but "out there." "The earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it," and the best preaching is done by those who have cultivated a loving eye for seeing life that way.

"No, thanks. I'll take it just like that."

"OK, den . . . no milk, no sugar, no bag." He waved his hands in the air as he spoke. "A buck eighty for you."

I handed him a couple of dollars, and he pressed the buttons on the cash register. I turned and surveyed the dining room. It was way too early for tourists; the cast of late-night regulars was present. Over in the corner, a young Puerto Rican couple leaned toward each other across a small table and talked earnestly, their pancakes and eggs barely touched. Beginning their day? Ending a long night? A homeless man in a stained army camouflage jacket sat by the window, staring into his coffee cup. A man in a rumpled suit, wearing black plastic–framed glasses, sat at the counter thumbing his way through a tabloid newspaper, a few crusts of French toast and a brown streak of syrup left on the plate he had pushed aside. The

door opened and an older woman with a creviced face and orchid-colored hair, wrapped in a frayed wool coat, walked in a bit unsteadily, a crimson lipstick oval smeared clumsily around her mouth. "Good morning, Costas!" she said cheerily to the man behind the counter. He nodded back at her. Suddenly she noticed me standing there. "Good morning, Dearie!" she said with a grin.

Costas wiped his hands on a towel and reached for a china coffee cup. "The usual, Gladys?" With an effort, she climbed onto a counter stool and settled on its cushioned seat, delighted to have accomplished this feat, clearly pleased to be known, to be welcomed into this familiar place. Costas placed the hot coffee in front of her, and she plucked a packet of sugar from a metal dish and began rhythmically tapping it on the counter. Outside in the morning darkness, an ambulance sped by, siren wailing. Over a speaker somewhere in the back of the diner, Tony Bennett crooned, "Have yourself a merry little Christmas. Let your heart be light. From now on, our troubles will be out of sight."

I catch myself. I'm up to my old tricks. It is four o'clock in the morning, and yet, almost despite myself, I am thinking homiletically, thinking like a preacher. I cannot shake the habit. Like an off-duty detective, I can't help noticing things—the camouflage jacket, the smear of lipstick, the troubled faces of the couple. And I am thinking about these things theologically, thinking about community and grace and spiritual hunger and salvation, and wondering if old Tony Bennett's singing is a carol of sorts, his choirboy-trained tenor voice pressing the banal holiday ballad toward a soaring hymn.

Witness as a way of seeing

To be a preacher is to be a witness. Witness is, of course, an ancient biblical symbol with powerful theological implications, but in a more down-to-earth sense, it is a habit of the eye, a way of seeing. Witnesses who have not seen anything are of little use in court, and if we are to preach as faithful witnesses, we must attend to the details of life happening around us. The least effective preaching, in my view, occurs when the preacher tries to rise above the grit of everyday existence, attempts to assume the voice of the pop philosopher or the broad culture critic, and pumps out expansive observations about great themes and

overarching concepts, whether these be of the evangelical variety ("God's Plan for Our Salvation") or the more liberal sort ("The Call to Live for Peace and Justice"). The scripture does not speak this way, and neither should sermons. Indeed, if the Bible spoke in such gaseous tones, it would have been discarded long ago, but the biblical writers were witnesses who saw things—wind-blown chaff, fat grapes in vineyards, the sound God makes walking in the garden in the cool of the day, the soft cushion in the stern of the boat on which Jesus' head rested as he slept through a storm.

The least effective preaching occurs when the preacher tries to rise above the grit of everyday existence, assumes the voice of the pop philosopher or the culture critic, and pumps out expansive observations about great themes.

In a remarkable passage in his legendary 1838 address to Harvard's divinity students, Ralph Waldo Emerson complained about a preacher he had heard "who sorely tempted me to say, I would go to church no more." The problem was that the day Emerson heard him preach, a snowstorm was raging outside the church, and the bland and abstract preacher was no match for the visual excitement the congregation could see through the window behind him. "The snow storm was real," said Emerson,

> *the preacher merely spectral; and the eye felt the sad contrast in looking at him, and then out of the window behind him, into the beautiful meteor of the snow. He had lived in vain. He had no one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived and acted, we were none the wiser for it. The capital secret of his profession, namely, to convert life into truth, he had not learned. Not one fact in all his experience, had he yet imported into his doctrine. This man had ploughed, and planted, and talked, and bought, and sold; he had read books; he had eaten and drunken; his head aches; his heart throbs; he smiles and suffers; yet was there not a surmise, a hint, in all the discourse, that he had ever lived at all."*[1]

"The true preacher," Emerson concluded, "can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life—life passed through the fire of thought."[2] To pass life through the fire of thought requires, of course, that life be witnessed, not observed from a detached mountaintop perch, but picked up, pebble by pebble, and turned in the light. Now Emerson's point here is helpful and well-taken, but finally a few clicks off course. To think of preaching as a form of autobiography, of self-disclosure, is a communicational and theological cul-de-sac. The task of the preacher is not to deal out, as Emerson argued, his or her life, but instead to deal out the common life in which we all partake. In fact, attending carefully to the actual world "out there" instead of simply the sensate world "in here" is an act of faith in the creator God. Some forms of religious mysticism may seek to find God in the interior of the soul, thus rendering the outside world an illusion. But not so Christianity, which as a creational and incarnational faith insists that the deepest truths are not to be found "in here" but "out there." "The earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it" (Ps. 24:1), and the best preaching is done by those who have cultivated a loving eye for seeing life that way. As a character in a Robinson Jeffers poem says, I "have fallen in love outward."[3]

The novelist William Saroyan was once asked about his method of writing. "My answer," he said, "is that I start with the trees and keep right on straight ahead."[4] As does the preacher who is a witness. We start with the details and keep right on straight ahead. Where most people see only the commonplace and the banal, claimed Saroyan, the novelist (and the preacher, I would say) sees the exceptional and the unique. When one first looks at a tree, every leaf looks the same, repetitions of the same leafiness. But a closer look reveals that this is "not precisely so, so that noticing this repetitious imprecision leads to everything else, especially life." According to Saroyan, starting with the small details of a single tree eventually leads to the depths of life:

> *A writer writes, and if he begins by remembering a tree in the backyard, that is solely to permit him gradually to reach the piano in the parlor upon which rests the photograph of the kid brother killed in the war. And the writer, 9 or 10 years old at the time, can notice that his mother is*

crying at the loss of the kid brother, who, if the truth is told, was nothing much more than any kid brother, a brat, a kind of continuous nuisance, and yet death had made him the darling of the family heart.[5]

And so the preacher begins by tugging on a single thread, a small detail—a crust of French toast, say, or a frayed wool coat—and keeps pulling until the whole fabric of human life gathers.

Witness as giving testimony

But it is not enough simply to say that a preacher is a keen observer of life. There is more to being a witness than mere powers of observation. Witness is not an artistic concept; it is at root a legal term. Novelists may write fine books exposing the depths of life, but witnesses have a more pragmatic function: they are summoned to court to give testimony. Something or someone is on trial, and the people desire and need to know the truth. They are not interested in the witness's autobiography, poetic skill, or personality, except as it bears on the truth. The words that pulpit witnesses employ may, like those of poets, playwrights, and essayists, be beautiful, but it is not beauty that is our measure; it is truth.

Is it true? Is it true that God is present? This, according to theologian Karl Barth, is the one urgent question that hangs in the air in worship. "On a Sunday morning, when the bells ring to call the congregation and minister to church," writes Barth, "there is in the air an expectancy that something great, crucial and even momentous is about to happen." The people, Barth contends, have left behind the everyday world, a world complex, rich in meaning, perhaps even full of pleasure, but a world ultimately unsatisfying. They have come to worship seeking to know this one thing: Is it true? "When people come to church," Barth asked, is it not the case that "they consciously or unconsciously leave behind them cherry tree, symphony, state, daily work, and other things, as possibilities somehow exhausted?"[6]

The words that pulpit witnesses employ may, like those of poets, playwrights, and essayists, be beautiful, but it is not beauty that is our measure; it is truth. Is it true? Is it true that God is present?

Yes, people leave behind the cherry tree, the symphony, and daily work to enter the court of worship in search of an answer to the question, is it true? But the answer to that question inevitably involves the cherry tree, the symphony, and daily work. People are not concerned to know if God is present in some abstract way. They want to know, is God present in life, in my life? The cherry tree and the symphony cannot give the answer to that question; only the gospel can answer that question. But the gospel's answer is yes: It is true. God is present! God is present in the sanctuary. God is present in the communion of the saints. And God is present in nature, and in the arts, and at the dinner table, and in the office cubicle—in cherry tree, symphony, and daily work.

The preacher is summoned to give testimony in response to the question, is it true? So the preacher gets up from the community, takes the witness stand, and tells the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help us God.

That is why I have always found so compelling Jürgen Moltmann's image of preachers as those who "come from God's people, stand up in front of God's people and act in God's name."[7] The preacher comes from God's people, comes up from the congregation. The preacher is a member of the assembly, a part of the body of Christ, and the preacher shares their life. The preacher has been with them at the dinner table and in the hospital. The preacher has shared picnics beside the lake and wept with them at the funeral home. The preacher has been with them in the diner at 4:00 a.m. on a Saturday and seen their physical and spiritual hunger.

Because they have called the preacher to this task, because the community of faith urgently wants to know, is it true? the preacher has put on the spectacles of the biblical text and looked out at every aspect of their common life. And now the preacher is summoned in the great trial to give testimony in response to the question, is it true? So the preacher gets up from the community, takes the pulpit-shaped witness stand, and tells the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help us God.

Witness as martyr

It seems to be such a gentle thing to walk into a diner at 4:00 in the morning and see it as a theater of the glory of God. But it is

not gentle. Many powers have a vested interest in keeping the diner just a diner and no more, in keeping its forlorn patrons social castoffs and nothing else. If people begin to think of their lives as arenas of the grace of God, they become less desperate, less vulnerable to exploitation. If people start to understand themselves as saints, they become less pliable as consumers and victims.

It is not for nothing that the New Testament word for witness is *martyr.* Most of us who preach will not be killed by the sword. More effective, less dramatic methods render us mute, laugh us to the margins, make us and our gospel irrelevant, kill us in the marketplace of public opinion.

But then there is always a Gladys, perching unsteadily on a counter stool somewhere and pulling around her what is left of her tattered coat, in a futile attempt to keep the winds of life away. The false witnesses have had their way with her, telling her that she's of little worth, defeating her with the news that death lurks down the dim alleyway of her future, waiting. Costas the counter man, the Puerto Rican couple, the guy thumbing the tabloid, the homeless man in the army jacket, the cook in the back, and indeed the whole world look toward Gladys and wonder if any other witnesses will testify in her trial. Is it true? Is it true that God is present for Gladys? It is our duty and delight to take the stand and tell the gospel truth that in our very midst is a daughter of the living God.

As William Stringfellow urged preachers,

> *In the face of death, live humanly. In the middle of chaos, celebrate the Word. Amidst babel, I repeat, speak the truth. Confront the noise and verbiage and falsehood of death with the truth and potency and efficacy of the Word of God. Know the Word, teach the Word, nurture the Word, preach the Word, defend the Word, incarnate the Word, do the Word, live the Word. And more than that, in the Word of God, expose death and all death's works and wiles, rebuke lies, cast out demons, exorcise, cleanse the possessed, raise those who are dead in mind and conscience.*[8]

Notes

[1] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Divinity School Address," delivered before the Senior Class in Divinity College, Cambridge, Sunday Evening, July 15, 1838; http://www.emerson central.com/divaddr.htm.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Robinson Jeffers, *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*, vol. 3, *1938–1962*, ed. Tim Hunt (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 178.
[4] William Saroyan, "Writers on Writing: Starting with a Tree and Getting to the Death of a Brother," *New York Times*, October 9, 2000.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Karl Barth, "The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching," in *Theological Foundations for Ministry*, ed. Ray S. Anderson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 691.
[7] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 303.
[8] William Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1979), 143.

About the author

Thomas G. Long is the Bandy Professor of Preaching at Candler School of Theology at Emory University. A Presbyterian minister, he has taught preaching for more than thirty years—at Erskine Theological Seminary, Columbia Theological Seminary, Princeton Theological Seminary, and since 2000, at Candler. His most recent books are *Preaching from Memory to Hope; Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian;* and *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed.

Tapping the potential of biblical preaching

Ryan Ahlgrim

On January 1, 1519, Ulrich Zwingli startled his congregation at the Grossmünster in Zurich, Switzerland, by announcing that he would not be reading from the prescribed text for the day but would instead begin preaching sermons on the Gospel of Matthew. He proceeded to read from the Greek text of the Gospel. Beginning with the first verse, he translated the text, explaining it and applying it as he went along. One excited listener, Thomas Platter, said it felt as if he were being pulled up by the hair of his head. Each Sunday Zwingli began his sermon at the point in the Gospel where he had left off the previous Sunday, and when he finished Matthew, he went on to the Acts of the Apostles, the New Testament epistles, and the Old Testament. His preaching, based on biblical exegesis, sparked the Reformation in Switzerland and influenced the Anabaptist commitment to biblical preaching.

Zwingli's preaching influenced the Anabaptist commitment to biblical preaching. But has his approach become a straitjacket for us? Could we benefit from widening our vision of biblical preaching?

Yet I wonder, has Zwingli's approach become a straitjacket for us? I preach most Sundays, so I rarely hear my Mennonite colleagues' sermons, but those I do hear tend to follow Zwingli's pattern: after a portion of scripture is read, the preacher interprets and applies the text. I am glad that Mennonite preaching continues to be biblical, solidly anchored in specific scriptures. But we could perhaps benefit from widening our vision of biblical preaching. Expanding our practice could help us more effectively tap into the transforming power of scripture.

In what follows we will consider four approaches to biblical preaching: exegetical preaching, doctrinal preaching, rhetorical form preaching, and topical preaching.

Exegetical preaching

The most straightforward approach to biblical preaching is exegesis. We begin with a scriptural text: a lectionary passage for that Sunday or a story or pericope of our choosing. Like Zwingli, we may work through a book of the Bible one passage at a time. The sermon addresses two basic interpretive questions: What did the text mean to its original writer/hearers, and what does it mean for us today? The first question we answer through careful exegesis, aided by scholarly commentaries, and the second question we answer through our ability to find parallels between the original biblical context and ours.

Although we may dress up this approach with additional frills, most Mennonite preachers—myself included—use it. We explain the text and then apply it. The obvious strength of this approach is that the biblical passage is central to the sermon; at best, the congregation hears a carefully researched and thoughtful exploration of the past and present meaning of a portion of the Bible. Amid a famine in biblical literacy in our culture, the exegetical preacher feeds his congregation's Bible knowledge.

But the exegetical approach to preaching has deficiencies and hazards. Some listeners complain that it is boring. Especially when the sermon is a biblical lecture, a few in the congregation will thrive on hearing scholarly analysis and systematic explanation, but many will not. Those who think in pictures or stories are likely to feel left out. Those without a strong interest in biblical history will likewise be unmoved. In addition, exegetical preachers face the challenge of communicating with people whose levels of biblical knowledge differ. If we assume too much biblical literacy or deal in sophisticated concepts, children and newer believers may not understand; if we dumb down the message, we will fail to engage those who know the Bible well.

Another problem is that exegetical preaching often breaks the story and message of the Bible down into unrelated tiny pieces. Typically, a sermon is based on a pericope of about a dozen verses. But how can one understand or appreciate the biblical message in one twelve-verse unit at a time? We break up books of the Bible into so many pieces (and if we follow the lectionary, jumble the order), no one can follow the flow or overall purpose of the book's author. Complicating the situation is the claim many homileticians

make that every sermon must be a presentation of the Christian good news—but not every pericope contains the good news. In fact, many do not. As a result, the preacher is forced either to preach a sermon that is a woefully incomplete gospel, or to violate the integrity of the pericope's meaning by going beyond (and sometimes against) what it actually says.

Despite these serious drawbacks, exegetical preaching on a biblical text isn't going to disappear—nor should it. Exegetical preaching is so basic an approach to biblical preaching that we dare not neglect it. But we can add features to exegetical preaching that can enhance its power to communicate with and transform the congregation.

Exegetical preaching often breaks the story of the Bible down into unrelated tiny pieces. But how can one understand or appreciate the biblical message in one twelve-verse unit at a time?

For instance, a sermon gains power if we articulate a contemporary problem or question that demands resolution. Exegetical preachers need to find a problem or question, inherent in the text, that is relevant to the congregation. If we begin the sermon with a story that helps illustrate that problem or question, listeners will be hooked. If we articulate the problem or question sharply enough, and it is relevant to their lives, they will want to pay attention to the exegesis of the biblical text in order to find the possible solution. Sustaining the tension as long as possible—by resisting the urge to reveal the solution too early—keeps people guessing, and they will devote more energy to listening.

Our exegetical preaching is also more powerful when we do not give in to the temptation to protect our congregations from the Bible. Preach about the passages that are difficult; include texts the Revised Common Lectionary has cut out. Dare to talk honestly about the final verses of otherwise beloved Psalms 137 and 139, for example. Allow the Bible to shock the congregation. Doesn't Jesus say in Luke 6:20–26 that the poor are entering God's kingdom, while the rich are going to be left out? Do not let the congregation off easy, but go with the text and struggle with it, and be honest about your own doubts or confusion.

Ask critical questions about what the biblical authors are saying. Is it true that birds don't need to worry, because their heavenly Father feeds them? Is it true that if anyone is in Christ,

there is a new creation? When we simply repeat biblical assertions without challenging them—especially those that are counter-intuitive or contrary to our observation—we reveal our fear of the truth, not our proclamation of truth.

Zwingli's exegetical preaching grabbed the attention of his congregation because he did not repeat from the pulpit what they had heard before. His preaching led him to condemn the lucrative practice of having Swiss men fight as mercenaries for foreign powers, and he dared overturn many cherished traditions of his church. For us, too, good exegetical preaching will avoid stating the obvious and simply reinforcing what everyone already thinks or claims to believe. Instead, we will interpret the Bible faithfully, to enable the congregation to see God's will and activity in a new light.

Our exegetical preaching is more powerful when we do not give in to the temptation to protect our congregations from the Bible. Preach about the passages that are difficult. Be honest about your own doubts or confusion.

Doctrinal preaching

Doctrinal preaching differs from exegetical preaching in that the preacher begins with a biblical concept or theme rather than with a particular passage as the focus of the sermon. The sermon may be about grace or forgiveness, faith or doubt, judgment or salvation, serving others or life after death. Or we may choose to preach a series of sermons based on a set of concepts found in a particular passage (see, for instance, Paul's list of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12, or the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5). The sermon is not an explanation of a single text. Rather, the preacher ranges throughout the Bible, to help the congregation better understand a biblical theme or concept.

A major advantage of this approach over the standard exegetical approach is that the Bible is not chopped into pieces, each chunk artificially carrying the entire weight of the preacher's message. Rather, we treat the Bible as a whole, seeing its story and development and multiple perspectives through an important and clarifying thematic lens. One might call this a canonical approach rather than a pericope approach to preaching. We treat the scripture as a canon of voices, each adding something different and important.

But doctrinal preaching shares a disadvantage of exegetical preaching: it often turns into a lecture—except now the lecture plods all over the Bible instead of confining itself to one manageable place! This drawback can be turned around, though, by using the problem/question technique suggested above. Few concepts or themes are static throughout the Bible. Instead, the Bible provides multiple—often contrary—perspectives on a theme. For instance, Deuteronomy and Job handle the problem of tragic suffering quite differently; the Psalms and the Sermon on the Mount adopt quite different attitudes toward enemies. These tensions pose a problem the preacher can solve or at least explore. The tension and desire for resolution hold listeners' interest.

Alternatively, instead of preaching on one biblical theme viewed in contrasting ways in the Bible, we can select two themes often considered contradictory—justice and mercy, for example—and explore how the Bible attempts to integrate these concepts. The apparent tension in the opposing themes makes the congregation hungry to hear a resolution.

A wonderful and sometimes scary byproduct of this approach is that a congregation engages the Bible with greater maturity, recognizing that God's self-revelation involves development, dialogue, and disputation, as well as possible contradictions. It is no accident that the Bible contains four Gospels rather than one neat synthesis. Contrasting perspectives are fundamental to biblical revelation. The congregation is thus invited into deeper reflection and openness in its spiritual life, and its understanding of what we mean by doctrine is challenged and transformed.

Rhetorical form preaching

Exegetical and doctrinal approaches to preaching are often analytical: the preacher attempts to persuade the congregation through a logical process of examining biblical texts, and the result is truths that can be stated in propositional form. This left brain approach appeals to certain listeners and discourages others. It tends to reduce faith to a thinking process and foster a rational, objective experience rather than a passionate, subjective one. But when we look at the biblical texts about which we are preaching, we discover a far greater range of rhetorical strategies. Why not preach the biblical texts in the way the texts themselves preach?

The Bible is a rich collection of many rhetorical forms. In its pages we see various ways of proclaiming the message about God: proverbs, dialogues, songs, history, philosophy, counseling, dreams, visions, and parables, to name only a few. Instead of imposing an analytical sermon on a text that may not be analytical, why not shape the sermon around the rhetorical form of the text? As Fred Craddock famously proposed: "Let doxologies be shared doxologically, narratives narratively, polemics polemically, poems poetically, and parables parabolically. In other words, biblical preaching ought to be biblical."[1]

According to this approach, the form of the text determines the form of the sermon. Is the text a story? Then the sermon should be a story. Don't analyze the biblical story, squeezing out some propositional truth or abstract idea while violating the text's own rhetorical form and strategy. Persuade the listener in the way the text persuades the listener—through a story! When we hear a joke, do we analyze it, or do we laugh at it? And after we laugh, we often respond with another joke, and the laughter continues. That's the best way to preach a joke. We misuse Jesus' parables if we turn them into analytical sermons. To preach about his parables, we should speak in new parables.[2]

Why not preach the biblical texts in the way the texts themselves preach? Instead of imposing an analytical sermon on a text that may not be analytical, why not shape the sermon around the rhetorical form of the text?

But if we follow this approach too literally, it breaks down. Does a sermon on a psalm need to be a song? Does a sermon on an epistle need to be an epistle? Does a sermon on a proverb need to be just a proverb? (That would be a short sermon!) An alternative is to mold one's sermon around the rhetorical purpose of the text, suggested by its rhetorical form.[3] Instead of insisting that the sermon have the same rhetorical *form* as the text, let the sermon move toward the same rhetorical *effect*. For instance, a sermon on Jesus' beatitudes should leave the congregation feeling blessed—given the reality of God's kingdom—amid their poverty and pain. A sermon on a psalm should lead naturally to our singing. A sermon on one of Paul's letters should offer Spirit-inspired counsel for resolving a current congregational conflict.[4]

Learning from and using the many rhetorical forms and strategies of the Bible can open the floodgates of creativity in our preaching, and our sermons may affect our listeners in ways similar to the ways the Bible itself speaks to us.

Topical preaching

Unlike exegetical and rhetorical form preaching, which begin with a particular text, and unlike doctrinal preaching, which begins with a biblical concept or theme, topical preaching begins with a contemporary issue that the congregation needs to address. But isn't this the very antithesis of biblical preaching? Yes—if the primary guidance for resolving the issue is one's own reason or personal experience or humanitarian concern. Such sermons use scripture as a veneer; the substance behind them isn't biblical. This kind of preaching is rightly maligned as "a sermon in search of a text." But topical preaching does not need to be biblically disconnected; in fact, one could argue that it has the potential to be the most biblical of all.

A sermon on Jesus' beatitudes should leave the congregation feeling blessed. A sermon on a psalm should lead to singing. A sermon on one of Paul's letters should offer Spirit-inspired counsel for resolving a congregational conflict.

Much of the preaching in the Bible is topical. The letter of James, for instance, is essentially a topical sermon. A few parts contain scripture quotations or brief exegesis of scripture—as in the discussion of whether Abraham's faith or his works made him right with God. But most of this sermon is focused on various concerns, and it answers those concerns with fresh pronouncements that echo biblical wisdom and Jesus' teachings. Or consider 1 John, a sermon-letter dealing with a problem: those claiming to be Christians are still sinning. The author does not resolve the issue by quoting or analyzing particular passages in scripture but by appealing to the good news witnessed and experienced in Jesus.

The Old Testament provides examples of topical sermons as well. Ecclesiastes is a philosophical sermon about the apparent meaninglessness of life, Job is a story-sermon about the problem of innocent suffering, and Amos is an oracle-sermon about social injustice. These sermons of the Bible do not engage in scriptural

exegesis. They are topical sermons that attempt to resolve a contemporary issue through reflecting on personal experience in light of the biblical encounter with God.

Topical preaching begins with and revolves around a contemporary issue, but it can be biblical in three senses: (1) it follows the rhetorical strategy of much of the Bible, (2) it is thoroughly dependent on the biblical witness for its understanding of God and ethical guidance, and (3) it illuminates the meaning of scripture as a whole (as opposed to one piece). This kind of topical preaching combines doctrinal and rhetorical form preaching approaches: it uses the rhetorical strategies of the Bible as a format, and diverse canonical themes and theology provide grounding and guidance.

Topical preaching has potential to bring immediate experience of the Word of God to us today. The preacher addresses concrete situations facing the congregation and proclaims (or, more humbly, suggests)—in light of what God has done—what God may be doing now and may want us to do now. This is essentially the preaching of a prophet. What could be more biblical?

Zwingli energized the Reformation through a new kind of biblical preaching. Inspired by his example, we continue to explore ways to preach biblically, and perhaps God's Spirit will pull us all up by the hairs of our heads!

Notes

[1] Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 3rd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), 163.

[2] Ryan Ahlgrim, *Not as the Scribes: Jesus as a Model for Prophetic Preaching* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2002). Chapter 7, "Creating New Parables," examines Jesus' parable form and suggests how one might create new parables that function in a similar way. Previous chapters examine all of Jesus' rhetorical forms.

[3] The standard work analyzing the various literary forms of the Bible and how to preach them is by Thomas G. Long, *Preaching the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989).

[4] David L. Bartlett, "Texts Shaping Sermons," in *Listening to the Word: Studies in Honor of Fred B. Craddock*, edited by Gail R. O'Day and Thomas G. Long (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 150.

About the author

Ryan Ahlgrim is lead pastor of First Mennonite Church, Indianapolis. One of his sermons is included in *Keeping the Faith: Best Indiana Sermons* (Zionsville, IN: Guild Press, 2003).

The sermon as fulcrum
The role of preaching in worship

June Alliman Yoder

Lots of books make fun of preachers. Comic strips poke fun at preachers' ineptitudes. Comedians see as fair game everything from television preachers' hairstyles to their fundraising techniques. And jokes about preachers, like jokes about lawyers, are acceptable in polite society. Utter the very word *preacher* and people get ready to laugh. I have taught preaching for many years, and one year my own students presented me with an autographed copy of *101 Things to Do during a Dull Sermon*.

The worship service includes tasks the congregation performs, addressing God. But when we get to the reading of scripture and the sermon that follows it, we turn a corner. Here God speaks to us.

People seldom talk about preaching with enthusiasm and anticipation. I occasionally hear someone speak appreciatively of a particular sermon, or even compliment someone's preaching style, but seldom do I hear positive comments about preaching. Even young children in the pews know that when the sermon begins, it's time to turn their attention elsewhere.

Some churches still attach great significance to preaching; without a Sunday sermon, they would feel they hadn't worshiped. Other congregations want to give the sermon a pass and are looking for other things to take its place in Sunday worship. They think preaching is just plain out of date.

Yet we often refer to ministers and pastors as preachers. Preaching is the role in which we see these people week after week. It is their role-defining action. We gather as a congregation, and our ministers and pastors preach the good news of Jesus Christ. So we refer to them as our preachers.

A look at the words used to designate the minister-pastor reveals that in Anabaptist-Mennonite circles in North America,

we have most often used the title "preacher." The Amish refer to these leaders as servants of the book; Mennonites in the Netherlands called them teachers or admonishers or preachers; Russian Mennonites used the designation preacher or elder; in North Germany, they were known as teachers or admonishers. Whether the message is brought by a teacher, admonisher, or proclaimer, preaching has defined the role of minister.

What is preaching?

Preaching is both content and delivery. It is an activity so multifaceted that we don't know if it is a biblical event, a theological event, or a cultural event. But for our discussion of the role of preaching in worship, we need to come to an understanding of what preaching is. The definition that I work with is: *Preaching is the public address form of ministry in which a word from God intersects with human need, and out of that meeting, lives are changed.* Four things are basic to this definition: public address, word from God, human need, and changed lives.

Public address implies that one person addresses a group. This activity is not a discussion, though discussion and questions might follow. Public address assumes the embodiment of the message. This form is not an e-mail or a Web site or a musical. These are not bad forms, but they are not public address.

A word from God alerts us to the fact that the Spirit of God ministers first to the preacher. We cannot speak what we have not first heard! Sometimes I think preachers are trying to find things to say, rather than listening for things to say. As a teacher of preaching, one of the most important things I try to help my students learn is how to listen to the Spirit of God. If we know what is given to us by the Spirit, we will know what to speak as our testimony and witness.

Intersecting with human need implies that the preacher will usually have a profound awareness of the congregation's situation. The Spirit will know the congregation's public and private needs, and if the preacher is listening to the Spirit, the sermon will address these needs. We preachers are often thanked for sermons we never preached, in which God's Word intersected with a listener's need by the power of the Spirit rather than by our conscious design!

The last mark of a sermon is that ***lives are changed.*** Transformation is a sign that the sermon is not just a speech but is initiated by God and shaped by our neediness. Out of that mix, changes in our lives emerge. Sometimes the changes are small, but they are changes nonetheless. Sometimes the changes are inner, but they are changes nonetheless.

If preachers understood the role of preaching, we would approach the pulpit with the passion to convey a word from God instilled in us through our study of the text and our quiet listening to God's Spirit.

If we preachers understood the role of preaching, we would be humbly honored to carry the name. What a difference it would make if we as preachers approached the pulpit every Sunday with the passion to convey clearly to the congregation a word from God that had been instilled in our hearts and minds through our study of the text and our quiet listening to God's Spirit.

It seems to me that if the congregation understood the role of preaching, they would begin to beg for more preaching, not less. We would have a thirst to hear the Word of God spoken to us in language and images we can understand. We would sit on the edge of our pews or chairs with our hearts and ears intently focused to hear the word that is being given to us.

What happens in worship?

Perhaps the second thing we need to agree on is what happens in worship. People come together to communicate with God—to praise, to adore, to confess their sins, to hear a word from God that speaks to their neediness, to give out of their means, and to receive a blessing as they go out into the week's work and activities.

The actions of the worship service include tasks the congregation performs. As a congregation, we are called to worship, we sing, we confess, and we pray. In these acts, we adore, we worship, and we speak. In these actions, the people address God. But when we get to the reading of scripture and the sermon that follows it, we turn a major corner in the worship service. Here God speaks to us. After the sermon, we respond to the word given to us: we sing, we pray, we bring our offerings and our testimonies. And then God gets the last word as we receive the blessing.

Scripture reading in worship often receives far less attention than it deserves. What would happen if those who presented biblical texts spent hours each week preparing? What a powerful thing it would be for the congregation to hear scripture imbued with the insights and energy and passion that come of internalizing a passage and preparing to speak it as the very Word of God. That kind of presentation of the word would capture listeners' attention in a way that the offhand drone of much scripture reading fails to do.

I know of several congregations that expect the person reading scripture to meet with someone to assist them in their oral interpretation of the text. Reading that would be appropriate for the phone book or the dictionary is not good enough for the Word of God! Our faith lives are shaped by the Bible's stories. It behooves us to know these stories and understand them. We must always look for ways to help our congregations hear the old stories anew.

Like the eunuch in his chariot, we cannot understand the ancient text we have read unless someone tells us what it means. That is the work of the sermon.

Scripture reading and preaching represent the voice of God in the worship service. Especially because the reading of scripture is often less than captivating, the task of preaching is vital in offering an interpretation of the text. Preaching serves the function of translating an ancient text for a contemporary audience. One task of preaching is to help make connections between the Word of God and the people within its hearing. The task is to allow the Spirit of God to speak through the preacher to the gathered body, providing insights, conviction, and comfort in relation to their needs.

So preaching translates the Bible into the language and context of the people. We read the text, and although we read it in the language of the listeners, it is still a text from long ago and far away. Like the eunuch in his chariot, we cannot understand unless someone tells us what it means. That is the work of the sermon.

What could be more important in our worship? The sermon is one of God's ways of communicating with us. I am concerned about any movement that encourages us to worship without giving the one we worship an opportunity to speak—and, I daresay, to speak as long as it takes to get the message across. Do

we set a limit to how long we can listen to a message from God? Though I think most of our listeners don't hear well after twenty minutes or so, I can't help but wonder how that might change if they felt that God had something important to say to them in the sermon. Presidents and prime ministers sometimes speak for an hour or more about important and complicated matters. No one gets up and walks out while they are talking. If we are merely listening to the preacher instead of listening for a message from God, no wonder we get tired of listening.

The role of the preacher as one who gives testimony or bears witness to what the Spirit of God has given is profound, as is the role of preaching in our worship services. We hold this space in our worship time as a time when one of us gives witness to what she has received. That might be a teaching, or an admonition, or a proclamation; any of these can be a witness to what the Spirit has given the one giving the testimony. So preaching is the witness of one person before the others to what God has done, or what he has been shown in the scripture for strengthening the listeners. I want to hear preachers talk about what they have been given by the Spirit, rather than about what they have decided to talk about.

In our worship services, scripture reading and preaching form the centerpiece, in the sense that some of the worship service helps prepare us to hear the sermon and some of the service helps us respond to the sermon. Another image would be that of a fulcrum. Other things move around it, but it holds the movement together.

How does worship take shape around the text and message?
If the preached word is the center of our worship, what is the center of worship planning? If preaching is to be the center of our worship, how does worship planning make sure that happens?

First, we decide what texts will be used. This task is essential, if we are to ensure that our worship addresses the needs of the congregation and that we speak the various messages from God. One reason sometimes given for using the lectionary is so our congregations will encounter wide segments of the whole Bible. My concern is simply that we cover the wide scope of the Bible over time. *Preparing Sunday Dinner: A Collaborative Approach to*

Worship and Preaching talks about the importance of menu planning.[1] I urge those charged with the responsibility to give care to the text selection process. Otherwise we tend to go back again and again to the same texts and the same basic messages.

Second, the person who is preaching on a given Sunday should come to the worship planning meeting having done his homework. The preacher will know the text well and will offer for the group's consideration some of the messages he has been hearing during study time and during quiet time before God. A scripture text has more than one message. The particular message we focus on will take into account the needs of people in this particular congregation. Remember, a good sermon addresses real needs. This is the "If Christ is the answer, what is the question?" issue. The messages of God speak to real needs.

If the preacher is clear about a message from God, and about why that message must be effectively delivered so the congregation will understand it, then the listeners are apt to sit up and listen carefully.

Third, after the preacher and the worship planners have decided what the text and message will be, the worship planning group begins to think of songs, psalms, prayers, and other worship elements that can help the congregation prepare for and respond to the message.

Fourth, after hearing the planners' discussion, the preacher goes back to finish the sermon with their insights and input in mind. In this way the sermon is the beginning and the end of the worship planning, but always with mutual respect among all involved, who give each of the parts its place.

An exception to this planning process is a worship service that focuses on one of the rituals of the church. Whether that rite is a communion service, a baptism, an anointing service, a marriage, or a funeral, worship planning will center on that part of the service. It is the task of the preaching to help worshipers understand what is happening in the ritual, so we can participate more fully. This same function might be true for some of the Christian year. The sermon helps us understand the incarnation at Christmas, walk the journey of Holy Week, make sense of the resurrection of Easter, and revisit the birth of the church at Pentecost. In these special times, the sermon may serve the worship event. In

most worship events, the rest of the worship elements find their place around the scripture reading and the sermon.

For years I have said that the single overarching reason for ineffective preaching is that the preacher does not know what the message is and what she wants to accomplish with that message. To put it more positively, if the preacher is clear in her own mind about a message from God, and about why that message must be effectively delivered so the congregation will understand it, then the listeners are apt to sit up and listen carefully.

In graduate school, a preaching professor asked our class to stand up, stand tall, and proclaim, "I am proud to be a preacher!" We responded pitifully, with weak voices that would have barely dribbled off the front of the pulpit. Again and again he cajoled us, until our voices displayed purpose and enthusiasm. "I am proud to be a preacher!" He was beginning to convince us. That is my purpose. We must be proud, not of ourselves, but of the calling given to us and especially of the Holy God whom we proclaim.

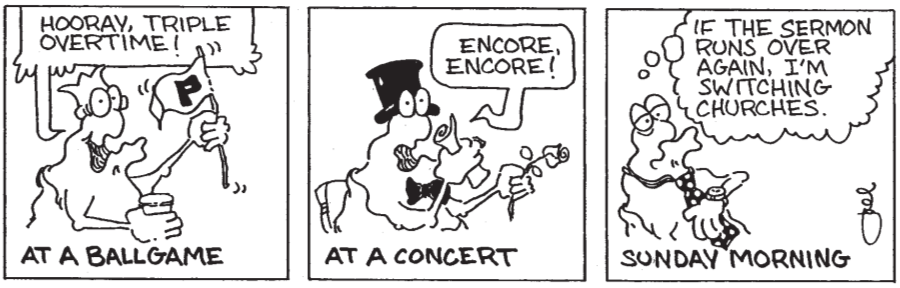
Note

[1] June Alliman Yoder, Marlene Kropf, and Rebecca Slough, *Preparing Sunday Dinner: A Collaborative Approach to Worship and Preaching* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005).

About the author

June Alliman Yoder recently retired from her post as professor of communication and preaching at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana.

Pontius' Puddle



Igniting imaginations with narrative preaching

Renee Sauder

The worship leader finished reading John 8:1–11, the account of the woman caught in adultery, and the guest preacher stepped into the pulpit. I settled comfortably into my pew, expecting the typical sermon, three points of evidence that would support a central theme.

But I was in for my first experience of narrative preaching, and I found myself listening with rapt attention as the sermon led me right into the gospel story. The preacher spoke from the perspective of a man in the crowd who had followed Jesus into the temple, eager to hear his teaching. I joined the man in the crowd as we sat at the edge of our seats, listening carefully in breathless expectation to the young carpenter turned teacher.

The first narrative sermon I heard let me abandon familiar ways of looking at a text as an intellectual exercise in careful exegesis; it moved me to struggle imaginatively with the spaces between the words.

I heard people walking into the hall, their sandals shuffling against the tiled floor. I heard their sarcastic talk ("Well, let's see what he says about this!"). I shifted uneasily as the doctors of the law and the Pharisees, their faces set in expressions of righteous certainty, pushed into the centre of the room a woman who had been caught in the act of committing adultery. I waited in breathless silence for Jesus to respond to their statement about what the law required: "The law of Moses says that such women are to be stoned. What do you say about it?"

I watched as Jesus looked at this woman in her public disgrace, tears of shame and desperation staining her cheeks. I heard the crowd murmur in disgust and anger at her shameful sin. I saw Jesus bend down, writing with his finger in the dust on the floor, then look straight into the eyes of each wise one there, and say: "Let

the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

I looked into the eyes of these doctors of the law and Pharisees, as Jesus' words slipped with razor sharp precision right past their defences into the hidden chambers of their hearts. I felt the convicting silence of the room, as each one who stood around that weeping woman was judged guilty by his own conscience. I watched as each of them slipped silently out of the room.

Then I watched as Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Is there no one here to condemn you?" "No one, sir," she said softly. "Neither do I condemn you," he told her. "Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." I blinked away tears as the young woman left the now empty room, forgiven, the weight of her anguish lifted.

The sermon that morning brought the Word of God to life with extraordinary power, as I found myself a participant in that biblical story, as I witnessed the characters, the suspense, the emotion of what had been just words on a page. That sermon let me abandon familiar ways of looking at a text as an intellectual exercise in careful exegesis; it moved me to struggle more imaginatively with the spaces between the words. That sermon would leave its indelible imprint on my preaching, as it made me aware of the power of story to ignite our imaginations, to introduce new ideas, even to explore difficult ideas or problems.

Storytelling as a human and biblical practice

Have you ever noticed how much of our lives is occupied with stories? We are storytellers by nature. The meal is over and the dessert plates have been pushed aside, but the guests remain around the table, telling stories. A family has gathered for a funeral, and a flood of stories flows, about the one whose life they remember, whose absence they mourn. We tell stories to share the events of our day with those we love, to spend companionable time with our children at bedtime, and to pass on family history. We swap stories at the grocery store and on the front porch. We retell the well-worn stories one more time, as good friends and family members patiently listen. Stories shape our lives.

As followers of Jesus, we are part of a storytelling tradition that reaches back to the stories of Israel about God's presence and acts

in creation and covenant and exodus and exile. Perhaps our Jewish brothers and sisters tell the story best by placing themselves in it. Every Passover, the Seder ritual observed by the descendants of Abraham and Sarah includes a question asked by a child: "Why is this night different from all other nights?" The father replies, "We celebrate tonight because we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and the Lord our God delivered us with a mighty hand." For many centuries, this story has been told—experienced—and it reminds us that much of biblical tradition comes to us in story form; narrative is the way many generations have received and remembered and passed down the acts of God and God's people.

Much of biblical tradition comes to us in story form; narrative is the way many generations have received and remembered and passed down the acts of God and God's people.

Jesus was a master storyteller. When he sought to explain the character or nature of God, he told his listeners the story about a shepherd who goes out to find one lost sheep, about a woman who will not rest until she has found her lost coin, about a father who desperately wants both of his sons to be at home (Luke 15:1–32). Jesus used what was around him—metaphors, images, people—to illustrate the most profound matters of the kingdom of God. Jesus knew stories have power to engage the hearer experientially.

Narrative preaching as embedded in biblical storytelling

Narrative preaching can take a number of different forms. Like the guest speaker I heard, a preacher can put herself in the shoes of a biblical character and tell the story as that character would. Or one might retell a story recorded in the Old or New Testament, allowing the story itself to give the sermon its shape, movement, or content. Or one might tell a personal story, one that really took place as an event in time. Our own experiences can be an indispensible resource for preaching, showing—in the words of Thomas Long—"how the Christian faith is embodied in the actual circumstances of life."[1]

Many years of preaching have taught me that long after they have forgotten the rest of a sermon, people can still recall the stories. It is the stories people remember, connect with, and take home. It is the stories and images they refer to when I make

pastoral visits. Such is the power of narrative to move the heart and touch the human soul: listeners participate, connecting their experience with the story that is told, finding new perspective on their lives, new insights into the text, new understandings of the world.

Narrative preaching is effective when we locate the intersection between our own lives and the lives of the actors in the biblical drama. To connect the biblical text with a story that will help explain it, lift it off the page, and give it another dimension is the creative and imaginative challenge of narrative preaching.

A few years ago, I was asked to preach at a spring weekend gathering of some ninety congregations of Mennonite Church Eastern Canada. It was an opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate our diversity as a conference, while affirming Christ as the centre, the point of unity around which we gather despite our differences.

I needed a story that would embody the text I had been given—Ephesians 4:1–6—in which Paul begs the church at Ephesus to find unity as the body of Christ. I remembered the neighbourhood of my childhood and told this story: Around seven o'clock on a warm summer Saturday evening, a gaggle of neighbourhood kids would show up. Nobody had to tell us. We just knew to meet under Bauman's cherry tree. It was time for our weekly game of hide-and-seek or sheep-in-the-pen. We emerged from our houses like a swarm of bees. The two oldest boys—Mark and Neil—would get us organized. They would begin choosing teams from the motley assortment of kids who had gathered to play. We would run and hide and chase each other until the sun went down. When it finally got so dark that we couldn't see each other well enough to continue the game, we'd head for home, disappearing behind our front doors as quickly as we had emerged. Until the next week, when we'd gather again under the cherry tree.

We must locate the intersection between our lives and the lives of the actors in the biblical drama. To connect the text with a story that will explain it, lift it off the page, and give it another dimension is the creative challenge of narrative preaching.

We were a diverse bunch of kids from different church backgrounds and family settings. Some of us were good at baseball;

others excelled at spelling. Some of us had brand new bikes, while others rode hand-me-downs with rusting handlebars and broken spokes. But under that cherry tree, all our differences evaporated into an acceptance of one another, creating a sense of belonging that made it fun just to be together and play.

This story was for me the image of the church evoked by Paul's letter to the Ephesians, which envisions a faith community reconciled to one another, brought together by Christ, who breaks down the barriers that divide us.

Narrative preaching as exercise in imaginative ways of seeing

Coming up with stories requires some imagination. Barbara Brown Taylor describes this imaginative process this way:

> *I am writing a sermon on Saint Luke. I know he was a physician and I know he was an evangelist, but everyone knows that and it is boring. I start imagining his black bag, his doctor's bag, and what is in it. I look once and see pills and bandages; I look twice and discover it is full of gospel stories with power to heal, and in that imaginative act a sermon on gospel medicine begins.*
>
> *The theological word for this experience is* revelation, *but the process, I believe, is imagination. In the imaginative act, two ideas are struck together and sparks leap through the air between them, revealing familiar notions in a new light.*[2]

Taylor describes the imaginative process as a way of seeing. To see something requires the ability to notice it in all its dimensions—height, depth, breadth, length.

My brother-in-law is an artist. Joe loves to paint under the open sky. Trees and flowers, mist and clouds, buildings and bridges find their way onto his canvas. I have watched him paint. On one day I spent with him, he parked his van on a dusty, abandoned parking lot full of gravel and weeds and began to unload his equipment. I looked at our surroundings and saw nothing and wondered why we had stopped in this windswept place. But Joe sees what I do not. He saw an old grain elevator, a piece of prairie

history, and captured the past on canvas. He saw colours and shapes, angles and shadows, and I watched as these images were collected and painted, and I realized that I was seeing everything differently, from the new perspective he showed me.

The previous day, I had complained about the number of transcontinental freight trains that barrel through his prairie hometown. They cross Main Street, stopping traffic, causing delays. I had been stopped at the railroad crossing at least three times that day. A short drive from one end of town to another became a lengthy ordeal, leaving me frustrated and impatient.

But then I saw the railroad crossing on Main Street as he captured it in a painting he called "Crossing Meditation," and I began to see things differently. I saw an invitation, an opportunity to use the wait while a train passes as a time to pause, reflect, meditate. I was reminded that more is there than meets the eye. I need to look beyond the appearance of things and uncover insights and truths that lie hidden beneath the surface. This is an imaginative task.

Jesus pointed to a wildflower, a field lily, and said with a grin, "Even Solomon never had clothes like that!" He stopped along a crowded street, with jostling crowds of working people and soldiers hurrying off to who knows where, and to the puzzlement of his disciples, he stood and stared at his feet for a long while. Then they saw that his sad eyes were fixed on a dead sparrow, a twisted, trampled fluff of feathers, and he told them, "God never misses seeing one of these, you know."

Look, Jesus said. Look at the silver coin, lying in a dark corner until a woman who will not give up sweeps it into the light. Look at the boy with the small lunch, and know that whatever you offer is enough to work a miracle with.

Look, Jesus said. Look at the silver coin, lying in some dark corner of the room until a woman who will not give up sweeps it into the light. Look at the young boy with the small lunch of loaves and fishes, and know that whatever you offer is enough to work a miracle with. The Gospel writers knew the power of these stories to heal hurts, soften hearts, and increase our ability to see ourselves, our neighbours, our world, through God's eyes. We are forever indebted to them for writing the stories down and inviting us to enter into them, and so equipping us with the means to bring God's Word to our lives.

These are the stories I treasure, and these are the stories we tell and retell in our preaching, as we faithfully carry out the task of communicating God's good news.

Notes

[1] Thomas Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 40.
[2] Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1993), 45.

About the author

Renee Sauder is currently serving in her fourth congregation as an intentional interim pastor in Mennonite Church Eastern Canada. She is always on the lookout for stories to engage her congregations.

Take, bless, break

A sermon on Luke 9:10–17

Michele Rizoli

The Evansons were out of our league. We were a plain old missionary family coming from rural New Hamburg, Canada, and they were über-educated university professors from glamorous Colorado, USA. But as she so often did when newcomers arrived in Brazil, my mom took the Evansons under her wing. She picked them up at the airport and then helped them find a place to live, furniture, schools for the kids, and so on. For all I know, she may even have helped them decide what their names should be in Portuguese; some names don't translate well.

As a fifteen-year-old, I didn't worry much about what Mom was up to all day. It was what she did at supper that day that was mortifying. She invited the Evansons to our house to eat with us. It was obvious that she hadn't planned to have visitors. Her menu for that evening was one of the plainest meals in her repertoire, straight from her humble life on the farm: bean soup and apple pie. Just picture it: white beans and chunks of white bread floating in a white milk base. Then just before we ate it, we'd sprinkle cinnamon on top—one last weird culinary touch. It was a good soup, but to the unitiated it lacked visual appeal. It's a soup you'd think twice about setting in front of your family, to say nothing of serving it to important visitors.

My mom didn't care about appearances. Her humble menu did not inhibit her hospitality, because it wasn't about food. She improvised: put a little more milk in, break up some more bread, and voilà!—enough for a crowd!

But my mom—whose name was Grace, by the way—didn't care about appearances. Her humble menu did not limit her hospitality, because it wasn't about food. It was about welcome. She improvised: put a little more milk in, broke up some more bread, cut the pie into smaller portions and voilà!—enough for a crowd! Her table boasted no place settings, no centerpieces, not

even a soup tureen. Martha Stewart would not have approved. We said a prayer (how embarrassing!), and then the university professors with their three kids crowded around the table with our lowly missionary family—and ate that soup like it was a feast.

About thirty years later, when my mother died, the Evansons sent a lovely condolence card. Do you know what they remembered best? That anemic-looking soup. When they were strangers, Mom's way of treating them like family made a lasting impression on them. You just never know what will happen when you open up to strangers, when you eat with them and include them in community.

We have another example of that hospitality in our scripture reading today. I wonder what people remembered about that day out close to Bethsaida, when Jesus fed an army of people. It was definitely memorable: all four Gospels include the story (Matt. 14:13–21; Mark 6:30–44; Luke 9:10–17; John 6:1–14). The event was also influential in early Christianity. The way it is written—telling how Jesus took the bread, blessed it, and broke it—ties the story to the liturgy of the Lord's Supper. To this day when we get together to be church, we gather around a simple shared meal in which bread is broken and blessed in Jesus' name.

There is a lot to see in this story, as in all biblical narratives. We hear echoes of God feeding the Israelites in the desert with manna. And there is the miracle itself. Was the miracle that so little food went such a long way? Or did the people have a change of heart and stop being stingy with what food they had? Did Jesus just get the potluck going? Was it the miracle of a random crowd becoming community by sharing a meal together? The early church probably preserved this account in scripture because it was all of these and more.

What I see in this story, and call our attention to today, is Jesus demonstrating the true nature of hospitality. Hospitality is welcoming strangers. It is often unplanned and unpredictable, it comes from an attitude of open invitation, it often includes food, and it is an abundant blessing to all involved.

Let's back up a little. As Luke tells it, Jesus had only recently sent out his disciples on a mission trip to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. The disciples weren't supposed to take along any provisions but instead were to count on whatever hospitality

they found along the way, staying in people's homes and moving from place to place. They did just that, and they came back on sort of a high, wanting to debrief. So they picked up and went away from the crowds to tell Jesus all about their ministry, without interruptions.

But their retreat didn't go as planned. The crowds followed Jesus and interrupted the meeting. The debriefing had to give way to teaching and healing. (I probably would have gently negotiated another time for the crowd to come back—when I could be better prepared.) Dealing with crowds of needy people was not on the agenda. But Luke tells us that Jesus welcomed them anyway, and spoke to them about the kingdom of heaven, and healed those who needed to be healed. I'm thinking the disciples were probably helping Jesus; after all, on their mission trip they had just learned more about how to minister.

The disciples didn't have any money, so obviously the people would need to go to town and use their own. The disciples were stuck in their reliance on material resources. They hadn't yet learned all they needed to know about God's economy.

Before they knew it, it was time for supper. Time flies when you're doing God's work. They were out in the middle of nowhere, the sun was going down, and a lot of people were still milling around. Jesus' training seems to have had an effect, and the disciples showed some sensitivity to people's needs. They were probably also remembering all the times strangers had offered them food in the recent past, so they saw it as their responsibility to make sure these people were fed. They really wanted to practice hospitality.

The problem was, the disciples put their heads together to try to figure out what to do, and they came up with nothing. Well, almost nothing. Somebody scrounged up a couple of fish and some bread, but that wouldn't do much good. They just were not in a position to feed anyone, let alone a crowd. That would take much more planning, a proper location, an industrial kitchen, some formal assessments, perhaps a fundraiser or two. Then they could begin to do some triage: figure out who was most in need, allocate resources, set up a food bank, and so on. The thing to do was delegate, send all these people back into town, and let someone else feed them. We can imagine them thinking, *I can't do it*.

Let someone else who is better prepared do it. So they explained the problem to Jesus and asked him if he would kindly dismiss everyone, tell them the service was over.

But it was not in Jesus' nature to send people away. He just couldn't help it; he was a welcoming person under all circumstances. Maybe he also sensed an opportunity to turn a crowd into community, a chance to live out God's idea of abundance and hospitality. You can feed them, he said. But the disciples still couldn't see a solution that didn't involve a monetary transaction. They didn't have any money, so obviously the people would need to go to town and use their own. The disciples were stuck in their reliance on material resources. They hadn't yet learned all they needed to know about God's economy.

Jesus said, "It's true that you don't have money, but you have *food*, don't you?" Then he proceeded to show how to welcome and feed people you don't know, people who have interrupted your plans with their needs, people who aren't going away. You start with what you have. You take it. You place it before God. You bless it. You share it. You break it. Take it, bless it, break it, and then watch God work.

The disciples divided 5000 people into smaller, more manageable groups, and set about passing out food. (Mennonites might see it as a miracle that they could organize so many people without forming a committee!) The people weren't asked to line up so that Jesus could hand each one some bread and fish. The disciples didn't organize a one-on-one meeting with Jesus. Nor were the disciples given first dibs. The people were grouped as equals sharing a meal. Strangers became neighbours in this kingdom way of doing things. The story also mentions baskets of bread. Apparently other volunteers were passing around food among the groups. No hierarchy, no turns, just equal sharing of the work and the food and the fellowship. You know how it is when a good potluck gets going?

I imagine scattered groups of people. Some are sitting by the olive grove watching the sun go down. Some are gathered around that woman who keeps following Jesus, ever since he healed her. Others are down by the stream washing up. Others are perched on rocks, dangling their feet and watching volunteers moving back and forth between the groups, giving out food. Everyone is visit-

ing, discussing what Jesus meant about the kingdom of God, reliving the details of the healings they witnessed or experienced.

Because the work is spread out, no one really notices until the end that there is so much food. It's only when they are cleaning up that they realize that twelve baskets of food are left. Twelve, like the tribes of Israel, like the first disciples. That number is a nice final touch, God's signature on the whole thing. They had more than enough—abundantly far more than all they could have asked or imagined—and God had brought it about.

People came away from that experience changed. They kept retelling the story. They kept replicating it. It became a ritual, a tradition, a way of reminding themselves: *So this is the power of eating together, of sharing resources, of trusting God, of living a life of welcome.*

My church in Toronto has had some discussions about how to be more welcoming, and I've heard such conversations in other church settings. I think it's great for congregations to be concerned about hospitality, but I sometimes wonder whether we're making it too complicated. My mother, Grace, almost instinctively welcomed people into her home and her circle of friendship. On her retirement from the mission field, her guest book listed more than 3000 entries—and she would continue to host guests for another fifteen years. Hospitality was her special gift, but being hospitable was also in her nature as a Christian.

Jesus shows you how to feed people who have interrupted your plans with their needs, people who aren't going away. You start with what you have. You take it. You place it before God. You bless it. You share it. You break it. Then you watch God work.

Maybe we could start to be a more welcoming church by just being more welcoming people in general. The opportunities are everywhere: to slip over so someone can sit beside me on the bench, to make room at the cafeteria table for someone who always sits alone, just to say hi to someone I don't know yet, to try to sense and respond to the needs of those around me.

Maybe we also need to lower our high standards and let God do a little bit of the work too. A few years ago, Florence joined our congregation in Toronto. She had come from Uganda, and we planned a party for her, to welcome her. I distinctly remember

being embarrassed about how few people showed up, like we were doing so little. But it turned out that Florence had never had a party that was just for her. She was overjoyed. She told us that she felt totally loved and welcomed, and she was. God used a party that had struck me as less than perfect to embrace Florence and make her feel she belonged in our community.

At its heart, as modeled by Jesus, hospitality is not about a well-made plan. It's not about inviting friends over for a dinner party. It's not about what we see on the Home and Garden channel or at a nice hotel. Hospitality is about welcoming the stranger, taking even a little bit of our friendship, our food, our listening ears, our helping hands, and entrusting them to God to multiply exponentially. It is about building a wider community. Take, bless, break. Hospitality is taking what we have, no matter how little, and blessing it by presenting it to God, and breaking it to share. It is part of our identity, our nature, as followers of Jesus.

About the author

Michele Rizoli is completing her MDiv at Toronto School of Theology and is a member of the preaching team at Toronto United Mennonite Church. She preached this sermon at First Mennonite Church in Vineland, Ontario, on February 10, 2008.

Navigating with a new map
Preaching for youth and young adults

Michele Hershberger

Sociologists, historians, and theologians suggest that we are living in the midst of a paradigm shift. Youth, they say, inhabit a world different from that of their parents; the way this generation views reality differs from their elders' experience of the world.

If it is true that youth comprehend the world in a new way, it stands to reason that preaching for youth must respond to this difference. The destination is the same: our goal continues to be preaching that has biblical integrity, that facilitates Spirit transformation. But we must get there using a new map. We must use a new structure and preach in a more participatory fashion. If we want to facilitate biblical understanding and nurture young disciples, our preaching must invite listeners to use not just the left but also the right hemisphere of their brain.

Those who take on the high calling of preaching for youth in the digital age must do two things: meet youth where they are and preach the word with integrity.

Seeing a new landscape

While many factors contribute to the new way youth comprehend reality, the factor that most affects the art of preaching is the change in thinking that electronic culture has brought to our society. It has created a new landscape for us. Like all media, electronic communication technology doesn't just transmit a message; in a vital way, it becomes the message.[1]

No medium is neutral—not television, computers, movies, radio, or the World Wide Web. We have moved from a predominately print-oriented culture to a culture where electronic media dominate. According to a recent study by the American Heart Association, 31 percent of youth spend thirty hours a week on the Internet.[2] Youth are particularly vulnerable to the disadvantages of this paradigm shift, because they have not learned the thinking patterns characteristic of print culture. The primary problem is

not the content, the sex and violence regularly shown over the airwaves notwithstanding. Even electronic media with good content change how we think.[3]

The very medium of print culture—the sequential lines of letters and spaces—has a profound impact on the gospel message. Print culture nurtures an individualistic, logical, abstract, objective world: A leads to B. In a print-dominated culture, we build knowledge on settled foundations of truth. We think about dense theological concepts, and we regard emotion with suspicion.

Preaching in a print-dominated culture typically has three points. The sermon, often read, includes complex theological analysis and moves sequentially. The Spirit transforms and conversion happens through logic and persuasion. In short, print culture uses the left hemisphere of our brain, the part of our brain that does critical thinking, makes categories, and figures out cause and effect. In a left brain encounter with God, we process abstract propositions and come to logical conclusions.

This approach has strengths and weaknesses. On the plus side, the abstract thinking characteristic of the print world helps us understand and appreciate complex aspects of the biblical world and our relationship with God. Yet we have neglected whole dimensions of the gospel by overemphasizing cognitive transformation and minimizing mystery and feeling.

In electronic culture, too, the medium is the message. The front page of a Web-based newspaper displays a jumble of unrelated headlines, most accompanied by illustrative photos. In this format, we read snippets of several articles and then click a button if we want more depth. TV ads, moving at lightning speed, use subtle visual tricks to get us to buy things. Sitcoms solve two different problems in less than half an hour. Camera shots of Katrina stir our emotions, but then the next image demands our attention, and we move on emotionally.

With its emphasis on the visual and the experiential, electronic culture nurtures the right hemisphere of the brain. Similarly, in a right brain encounter with God, mystery and feelings preside. We experience God instead of thinking about God. This culture fosters corporate approaches to faith and a reliance on intuition.

We can identify advantages and disadvantages in this world, too. Taken to its extreme, electronic culture points us toward

relativism. It weakens our capacity for abstract thought and critical reasoning. But in activating an important part of the brain, it enlivens the very parts of the gospel the print culture of modernity allowed to atrophy. We think more about concrete realities; we embrace mystery and feeling. The Gospel narratives, in recounting central stories of our faith, are better understood in an image-based culture than in a print culture. Electronic culture in many ways mirrors the first century and brings back elements of faith the modern world has neglected or suppressed.

The abstract thinking characteristic of the print world helps us understand complex aspects of the biblical world and our relationship with God. Yet we have neglected dimensions of the gospel by emphasizing the cognitive and minimizing mystery and feeling.

Moving between hemispheres

Our desire to share the gospel with youth should not lead us to try to shield them from electronic culture. In many ways, that culture is a gift to the church. But if we remain unaware of or naïve about the effects of the digital culture on the thinking of those who are immersed in it, we may undo the wonderful gifts of the print culture, especially our ability to appropriately comprehend the medium of scripture. An overemphasis on either hemisphere of the brain takes us into dangerous territory. So the very gift of the electronic culture is also its greatest danger.

Those who take on the high calling of preaching for youth in the digital age must do two things: meet youth where they are and preach the word with integrity. This happens when we preachers, acknowledging the dominance of right brain thinking, begin in that hemisphere and then move to the left hemisphere, always working toward the goal of equilibrium.

Trying a new road map

One of the best ways to move toward these two goals comes from Eugene Lowry's sermon structure, as illustrated in *The Homiletical Plot*.[4] The structure of Lowry's "loop" does two things well: it produces sermons that feel authentic to a postmodern audience, and—because it builds tension and paints word pictures in our minds—it begins with the right brain and then opens the door to the left.

My introduction to Eugene Lowry's sermon structure in June Alliman Yoder's preaching class at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary was love at first sight. I had come to seminary from a youth ministry background, so I had firsthand experience of the wandering eyes of the senior high students, the squirming of the junior high kids—the yawns, the glances at the clock. I had done everything my college speech teacher advised: Tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, and tell them what you told them. I peppered my three-point sermon with juicy illustrations that brought the point home, and I gestured wildly. I found their lack of engagement perplexing.

But Lowry—and June—helped me see other ways to structure a sermon. They showed me that the familiar structure—linear, logical, and sequential—relies heavily on a print culture. But my fellow worshipers live in an electronic culture, and they need something different. They need story.

Every good story, whether in the form of a movie or a Jesus parable, has a problem. In the digital age, the key to building interest is to find that problem. Even Paul, who wrote in logical, sequential ways, had a story, a narrative problem underneath the dense theology. Our job, if we want to connect with youth, is to find that story. This is the way we engage the right brain. And Lowry's loop is our guide.

Lowry's structure features five steps: Oops! (upsetting the equilibrium); Ugh! (analyzing the discrepancy); Aha! (disclosing the clue to resolution); Whee! (experiencing the gospel); and Yeah! (anticipating the consequences). The first three steps are the most important steps in the goal of beginning in the right hemisphere and moving into the left. All the steps work like a good story. The first step introduces the problem right away. Like many movies that upset the fruit basket even while the opening credits are running, the Oops! throws the audience a curve. The goal of this strategy is not simply to wake up the group with a good introduction (that's as superficial as icing on a cake), but to make them see that this story (if we're in the Gospels) or this theological discussion (think Paul) happens in real life. And real life features turmoil. The second step—Ugh!—discusses the problem. As in a good play or movie, the tension heightens, and every passing minute makes resolution seem more unlikely.

Both steps contribute to a sense of authenticity, a high value for postmodern youth. When the preacher discusses in an honest way the problem a passage presents—"This Sermon on the Mount ethic is impossible to follow"—youth are able to identify, because they probably have similar thoughts. They wonder why Jesus said he came only to save Israel, or why he told the disciples to eat his flesh, or why the woman tried to touch the hem of his coat. That's crazy talk. Youth also find it refreshing (and want to hear more) when the problem of the story is the preacher's own doubt.

Taken to its extreme, electronic culture weakens our capacity for abstract thought and critical reasoning. But in activating an important part of the brain, it enlivens the very parts of the gospel the print culture of modernity allowed to atrophy.

At the Charlotte assembly of Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA in 2005, I admitted that I hate the story of Acts 3:1–10. In the Ugh! part of the sermon, I offered several reasons for that dislike, but the clincher was that the story makes me look bad. I can't heal people, and I don't have the faith to tell someone who is lame to stand up and walk. Instead of tiptoeing around the issue or making the healing a spiritual metaphor, I looked squarely at a problem—me. It's a gift of grace to admit the problems of passages, and youth need that grace. Adults do, too.

Step three, the Aha! moment, also works on us the way a good movie does. When the situation seems most grim, Surprise! What looked bad is really good. In my Acts 3 sermon I discover, along with those listening, that I'm not Peter and John; I'm the beggar! Jesus used a variation on the Aha! moment when he told parables. Those listening thought they knew what was going to happen, and then Jesus caught them by surprise: the bad guy, the Samaritan, is the hero! Many Bible stories have this element of ironic reversal: our very gospel of grace seems upside down in the world's value system. The foolishness of the gospel about which Paul wrote is the paradox postmodern youth want to hear. Our job is to find this twist and use it.

All of Lowry's steps, except the first one, can be an entry into the left hemisphere. I strive to enter the realm of critical analysis as early as possible, with step two. If we have hooked our listeners in spelling out the apparently impossible dilemma, and if we work

at heightening the tension in step two, then we are free to expound with details on the cultural-historical background and delve into difficult theological questions in all the steps.

We need to dispel the myth that youth and young adults can't listen to long and complicated sermons; they have a remarkable capacity for doing so. They get bored not because a sermon is too complicated but because most print-culture sermons are too obvious. The worst thing we can do is give the thesis away (tell them what we're going to tell them) in the introductory paragraph. Then they think, why should I bother listening to the rest of the sermon?

As we engage our listeners, starting with the right brains and then skillfully moving them to deep analysis in their left brains, we travel a new road that helps bring transformation.

Another misconception is that youth and young adults like sermon illustrations, and while illustrations do add color, they do not create a singular story in the worshiper's mind, which is Lowry's goal. When I use this structure, my sermon has a single point that I give away at step three, and then only after a long step-two process. As listeners struggle with the discrepancy of the original story, I avoid disrupting their musings with a different, modern-day illustration. Done right, a sermon using this structure is interactive and should not be interrupted. Done right, it will enable congregants see the biblical story play out in their minds.

Traveling together

Lowry's loop is only one structure for preaching that engages both sides of the brain. Like all sermon patterns, it can be overdone and become monotonous.

Another helpful way to engage youth and young adults is to build interactive participation—traveling together—into the sermon itself. Preachers can encourage participation in several ways. Speaking extemporaneously rather than reading a sermon is a huge step toward enhancing our listeners' engagement. Freed from a script, we communicate authenticity. Even though the sermon is memorized, we are speaking directly to the audience, and we may even say something new, something more pertinent than the words in our script. We also create an element of surprise. Preaching without a script is like walking a tightrope

without a safety net, and the congregation senses that. And the youth appreciate the risk we take.

Another way to promote participation is to ask for response, either during the sermon or after it. If we ask people to text their responses to a cell phone number, the person receiving the text messages can pass along the collected feedback, even in the middle of a sermon. Encouraging cell phone use during worship has its downside, but it does communicate to youth that we care what they think.[5] In a sermon, the primary medium is the preacher. And the medium is the message.

This new kind of preaching, a preaching that engages both sides of the brain, appeals not only to youth and young adults but also to older adults. Everyone benefits from encountering the gospel from several angles. Of course, it's the Spirit's work to transform people. But we as pastors are called to aid that process as best we can. As we work to engage our listeners of all ages, starting with the right brain and then skillfully moving them to deep analysis in their left brain, we travel a new road. And we will find our new route helps bring transformation.

Notes

[1] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man,* 1st MIT Press ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 7. See also Shane Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 29–32.

[2] Labspaces.net, http://www.labspaces.net/view_news_comments; and American Heart Association: http://www.americanheart.org/ Both Web sites indicate that 52 percent of boys and 26 percent of girls reported average total screen-time levels above 42 hours per week; 52 percent of boys and 39 percent of girls reported average levels of TV/video use above 23 hours per week; and 24 percent of boys and 7 percent of girls reported average levels of computer/internet use of almost 30 hours per week.

[3] Hipps, *The Hidden Power,* 75.

[4] Eugene Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form,* expanded ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

[5] Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 36.

About the author

Michele Hershberger teaches Bible and youth ministry at Hesston College, Hesston, Kansas, and loves to preach in postmodern contexts.

Christmas is good news, isn't it?
A sermon

Dan Epp-Tiessen

Christmas is good news, isn't it?

Christmas 1994 was the most painful Christmas season of my life. That year as December 25 approached, Esther and I found our pain and sorrow growing deeper and deeper. Almost every evening that December, after we got our two young boys in bed, we would collapse wearily on the living-room couch. We would light a candle to remember Tim, and then we would weep, tears flowing freely down our cheeks. An hour or so later, when we were even more exhausted, we would climb into bed. Christmas of 1994 was so difficult because two months earlier our eight-year-old son Tim had died of a brain tumor.

Christmas is good news, isn't it?

My friend Doug used to work at an inner-city Christian men's hostel. He told me that as Christmas approached, the mood in the hostel became more and more foul, as the men became more mean and nasty to each other and the staff.

Christmas is good news, isn't it?

I remember a man I will call Paul Stevens. Paul faced some mental challenges. He was able to live and function on his own, but he had trouble connecting with people. And so Paul had few friends, and most of the members of his family had died. Paul hated the Christmas season, and he especially hated Christmas day. Paul received no gifts, and he had no special people to spend

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This sermon illustrates the Lowry loop sermon structure and style of preaching Michele Hershberger advocates in the previous article. It is reprinted, by permission of the publisher, from *The Messenger: A Publication of the Evangelical Mennonite Conference* 46, no. 21 (December 3, 2008).

the day with. He couldn't even find a coffee shop that was open, where he could escape from his aloneness.

Christmas is good news, isn't it?

Have you ever talked to someone who has just gone through a marriage break-up, or lost a loved one, or lost a job, or gone bankrupt, and asked how he feels about the Christmas season? If Christmas is good news, then why do so many people experience Christmas as such a difficult time?

There are probably many reasons, but one of them has to do with what we have done with the Christmas season. Every Advent I remember an article by Maynard Shelly that I read more than thirty years ago now. The article is provocatively titled "Do Christmas Cards Tell the Truth?" Shelly concludes that they don't. Think of how the typical Christmas cards portray the story: beautiful sentimental scenes of a confident and calm Joseph, a radiant Mary, and a peacefully sleeping baby Jesus, all surrounded by cute and cuddly animals. Is this the truth about Christmas?

No wonder people feel their poverty and marginalization all the more acutely at Christmas. When there is deep pain and brokenness in our lives, a perfect Christmas doesn't offer us much good news.

On the basis of Luke's Christmas story, we imagine Jesus being born in a stable. A stable is a place where animals are kept. Stables come complete with certain animal by-products and the annoying flies and pungent odors related to these byproducts. So where in the Hallmark cards do we see the manure, the flies, the cobwebs, the stench? In the Hallmark version of Christmas, the stable has been pressure-washed, the animals have all showered recently, and Mary looks nothing like an exhausted young women who has just gone through hard labour after a long journey and given birth to her first baby in a barn far from the familiarity of home and family.

It's easy to see why Christmas cards don't tell the truth. Realistic portrayals of the birth of Jesus aren't likely to sell many cards. And so we sentimentalize and romanticize Christmas and turn the story of Jesus' birth into a perfect event that lacks the unpleasant features that characterize the story as told in the New Testament.

Maybe it is precisely this false perfection that prevents many people from experiencing Christmas as good news. Often Christ-

mas in our society is about perfection. Christmas cards give us a perfect stable, a perfect Mary, and perfect animals. Television commercials give us (or promise us) the perfect gift, received in the context of a perfect family. (Families in such commercials are always complete, happy, and without any of the tension or conflict that afflicts pretty much every real family.) Martha Stewart gives us a perfectly decorated house, a perfectly set table, and a perfect meal.

No wonder many people do not experience Christmas as good news. No wonder the men at the hostel feel their aloneness and alienation all the more intensely at Christmas. No wonder poor and marginalized people feel their poverty and marginalization all the more acutely. No wonder grieving people feel overwhelmed by the waves of pain. When there is deep pain and brokenness in our lives, a perfect Christmas doesn't offer us much good news.

Our Christmas cards want us to deny or turn away from the pain and brokenness of our world. But there is no good news in that, because if we dare to be honest, we know that brokenness is all too real.

But the real good news of Christmas is that Jesus was born in a barn. The Lord of this universe came to us as love incarnate in the form of a vulnerable baby born to poor peasants. This baby was born in a dark, stinky, fly-infested stable. If you want to contemporize the story, imagine Jesus born in a back alley behind the Safeway store, where Joseph has made a bed for Mary and Jesus in the dumpster. And that is good news. God does not come to us in and through perfection. Jesus the Christ was born into a world where there is manure, obnoxious disease-spreading flies, and far too often life stinks. And that is good news!

Christmas is not about Jesus being born into perfect stables or perfect families or perfect lives or a perfect world. Christmas is about Jesus being born into a world that is deeply broken and hurting, a world in need of healing and redemption. Our Christmas cards, shopping malls, and TV commercials want us to deny or turn away from the pain, suffering, and brokenness of our world. But there is not much good news in that, because if we dare to be honest with ourselves, we know that many forms of brokenness are all too real in our world.

The good news of Christmas is that God does not turn away from a broken and hurting world, but God enters and becomes immersed in this world and its misery. God sends Jesus to enter into the world's pain and bring light and hope and joy and peace and new life. God sends Jesus to enter our pain, our lives, to bring us light and hope and joy and new life.

The good news of Christmas can be summarized by the marvelous words of John 1:5, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." Christ is the light that shone into the darkness of first-century Palestine dominated by an oppressive Roman Empire that ruled with an iron grip and taxed the life-blood out of the Jewish peasants. Christ came as light to heal the sick; he came to cast out life-destroying demons, to confront oppression, and to proclaim the good news that God's kingdom had arrived. Therefore, people could receive the marvelous grace of God and repent. They could leave behind sinful and destructive beliefs and ways of living. They could embrace the joy of God's reign, experience kingdom grace and forgiveness, and begin to live in life-giving kingdom ways now already, even amidst the darkness.

Christmas is about Jesus Christ entering the real world of first-century Palestine, and every time and place, in order to bring light, healing, forgiveness, renewal, and abundant life. Christmas is about Jesus coming into the pain and suffering of your life and mine with God's promise that someday all creation will be illuminated and renewed by the healing light of God. And we can receive and walk in that light now already.

Indeed, Christmas is good news, isn't it!

About the author

Dan Epp-Tiessen is associate professor of Bible at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba, and has the privilege of teaching a bit of preaching on the side. He is the CMU editor of *Vision*. This sermon was preached to a group of young adults at a CMU Advent chapel.

Preaching and pastoral care

John H. Neufeld

Among the various roles pastors have, preaching and pastoral care are often considered the most important as well as the most demanding of our time and energy. Obviously, preaching is the most public aspect of pastoral work, never engaged in with just a person or two; in contrast, we often give pastoral care in one-on-one settings or in small groups. Seminary curricula acknowledge the importance of these two areas of ministry by offering separate courses in these disciplines, but rarely do we give adequate attention to the relationship between preaching and pastoral care. Homiletics courses may mention in passing that pastoral calling and care will provide the contacts necessary to help pastors prepare sermons relevant to the actual experiences of the people in the pews, but I am not aware of preaching courses or texts that investigate the contributions of preaching to pastoral care.

Seminary curricula acknowledge the importance of preaching and pastoral care by offering separate courses in these two areas of ministry, but rarely do we give much attention to the relationship between them.

In exploring the relationship between preaching and pastoral care, I begin by clarifying my assumptions about the church as the larger context within which and from which both preaching and pastoral care derive their mandate. I assume that both preaching and pastoral care must serve the larger purpose of the church in the world, and whatever we attempt to do in these areas ought to be measured by its appropriateness to and congruence with the larger calling of the body of Christ in the world.

I will elaborate on the unique roles of preaching and pastoral care with slight shifts in emphasis: from what the pastor does to what preaching does in the lives of people, and to what pastoral care does for those receiving it. I want to show how these out-

come-based expressions of ministry intertwine and interact. I will propose three major ways preaching can contribute to and express pastoral care for members of our congregations.

Some assumptions

A study of John 20:21, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you," has led me to understand the church as the community of the sent. This community of the sent leads a dual existence: it is a body of people sometimes gathered and often scattered. When gathered, the body expresses care for its members, devoting time to worship, prayer, study, and leaning on one another. When scattered, the members of the body serve as light, salt, and witnesses wherever they live, work, and socialize. All members of the body are called to serve when they are scattered, while some are called to specific expressions of ministry within the body gathered. Ministry within the body gathered must always take into account the experiences of believers in their scattered existence.

When Paul wrote about God's people set apart with certain gifts—apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers (Eph. 4:11–16)—he stated that these leaders have a twofold function: to equip God's people for service and to build up the body until all achieve maturity as measured by Christ. It is my understanding that both preaching and pastoral care contribute to building up the body and equipping believers for ministry in the context of being gathered or scattered. Let us now, for the sake of clarity, consider these two aspects of ministry separately.

The primary pastoral care concern is that everyone in the congregation experience life to the full. As Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). The context of these words is teaching about Jesus the shepherd. Shepherding language has Old Testament antecedents. According to one Old Testament source of such language, Ezekiel 34, being a faithful shepherd among God's people entails caring, tending, looking after, and nurturing. These ancient descriptions of the work of faithful shepherds continue to be critical dimensions of pastoral care in our time.

Faithful pastoral caregiving engages the caregiver in people's lives, with the hope that such involvement will contribute to the anticipated outcome: that each person experience life to the full.

This understanding of pastoral care encompasses all people in the church, no matter what their age and social, economic, or educational status. Pastoral care is often given unofficially and informally yet very effectively by one person to another, as well as by pastors and others chosen to serve as caregivers officially representing the congregation.

The notion of the congregation as a whole being the womb of care for everyone finds expression in the many "one another" verses in the New Testament. These verses are addressed to all the people, never only to those who are set apart as leaders. In the New Testament, at least seventeen attitudes and actions are linked with "one another–ing," the most repeated one being "Love one another." When we review these expectations for community life, it becomes clear that the body of believers is called to practice an incredible amount of practical care for one other. John Patton affirms this conclusion: "Pastoral care is the person to person response that grows out of participation in a caring community and which seeks to enable persons to give and receive care and to experience community."[1]

Both preaching and pastoral care contribute to building up the body and equipping believers for ministry in the context of being gathered or scattered.

A limited amount of pastoral care is given by the pastor who has received training in the art of expressing care, while much pastoral-like care will be expressed and shared among the members of the church. All these efforts of tending and caring for one another, whether formal or informal, incidental or scheduled, contribute to the possibility that everyone will be able to experience life to the full. That is the hoped-for outcome of all efforts in the area of pastoral care. In addition to the actual caregiving pastors are able to offer individuals, we also have a unique role to play in the community of caregivers. I will return to that role when we look at the relationship between preaching and pastoral care.

It is my assumption that congregations are ready for preaching that is vital, connected to real life, and biblically based. They are ready for preaching that engages listeners and includes appropriate pastoral self-disclosure. Sermons will have these qualities when pastors commit time, energy, and creativity to the lifelong task of

leading people in an ongoing conversation with scripture about life and meaning.

Keeping in mind Paul's expression "equipping believers for ministry," I propose that the ministry of preaching ought to have the following five outcomes. Cumulatively, over time, faithful preaching will lead to growth in five areas: (1) Christian identity, (2) a sense of vocation or calling, (3) identifying issues that need the church's attention and discernment, (4) a capacity to cope with crises, and (5) understanding of the Bible. If we look for these outcomes in the lives of members of the congregation, we have a tool for assessing whether we are proclaiming the "whole counsel of God" in ways that are balanced and related to life. Obviously, these outcomes overlap with a number of the issues that come into focus under pastoral care, broadly understood.

These outcomes serve as an elaboration of the statement of purpose C. J. Dyck formulated about Anabaptist preaching: for sixteenth-century Anabaptists, the sermon was "a tool which the Spirit could use for salvation and the growth of the hearers."[2] With these five outcomes as criteria, we have some idea about what that growth might entail. By suggesting these desired outcomes of preaching, I am declaring my underlying assumption that preaching matters a great deal in the life of the congregation.

The contributions of preaching to pastoral care

One hoped-for outcome for preaching noted above is that it will help people grow in their capacity to cope with crises that arise in life. Life's crises are basically of two types, developmental and circumstantial. People experience developmental crises as a matter of course as they go through the life cycle. These include the changes of puberty, the issues of middle age, and the peculiar challenges of retirement and aging. Circumstantial or situational crises are those that come upon us, often without warning: accident, natural disaster, illness, and the like. Erik Erikson has described a crisis as "a turning point, a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential."[3]

Preaching has a vital role to play in preparing and equipping people as they go through the inevitable rough patches of life. In at least three ways, it contributes to pastoral care, in strengthening their capacity to cope.

Preaching contributes to pastoral care by creating a foundational framework. Pastors must be aware of what members are wrestling with in their lives, and we must also address the question, what resources do our people have that enable them to deal with difficult issues? What we are concerned about here is the development of a worldview, an overarching faith that provides perspective and equips individuals and families in the church to cope with difficulties they encounter. Theologian Harry Huebner and others speak about the need to foster a Christian imagination and acquire appropriate vocabulary that will enable us to reflect on and deal with life's situations as followers of Jesus. Developing a foundational Christian perspective cannot be accomplished in a short time, nor is it something we learn in the midst of a crisis. To accomplish this goal, preachers must take the long view and deliberately work at this project over a period of years.

Over time, faithful preaching will invite the congregation to engage the whole biblical narrative, in which Christian understandings of God and the meaning of human life are rooted.

Over time, faithful preaching will clarify several basic elements of Christian imagination. It will invite the congregation to engage the whole biblical narrative, in which Christian understandings of God and the meaning of human life are rooted. Such preaching provides transcendent perspectives of hope and trust in God that enable us to face the complexities of life. Such preaching tackles the big questions of suffering and evil in relation to our understandings of God—not only in the abstract, but linked to specific difficult experiences with which people in the congregation struggle. Such preaching conveys the truth that not all difficult questions or experiences have quick and tidy answers.

Faithful preaching also provides discernment about unrealistic notions about life. While some may be taken in by a health and prosperity gospel, faithful preaching supplies the basis for discernment that relies on all the voices in the scriptural canon. Sound biblical-theological reflection will name and explore unrealistic attitudes and popular notions about life that abound in our culture.

When preachers have these outcomes in mind, we will be energized to work diligently, courageously, and creatively in

developing a foundational Christian perspective that dares to deal with the difficulties and ambiguities of human existence.

Preaching contributes to pastoral care by modeling. Over time, preachers touch on many aspects and experiences of life. The way we do so, not just the content of our messages, has an impact on our listeners. Through our approach to difficult subjects, we convey much more than we explicitly say. We model something vital and profound simply by addressing from the pulpit issues that some people may perceive as too sensitive or too private for public speech. By naming and dealing with sexuality, money, depression, loss and grief, anxiety, abuse, dying, and other issues, we challenge and overcome taboos and assumptions about what experiences our faith can deal with.

Through our approach to difficult subjects, we convey much more than we explicitly say. We model something vital and profound simply by addressing from the pulpit issues that some people may perceive as too sensitive or too private for public speech.

When pastors preach on these important issues, we also have the opportunity to use appropriate self-disclosure to share our own vulnerability. In open and honest struggling with life's issues in terms of faith, pastors demonstrate that we too continue to live with unanswered questions, even doubts and unresolved issues. When I was receiving chemotherapy for my cancer some years ago, I preached a sermon in which I shared my struggle with the bold affirmation of Psalm 121, "My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth." During that crisis time in my life, the once-comforting words did not suffice. I was pressing for an answer to the question, *how* does help come from the Lord when I am dealing with cancer? I agree with theologian Douglas John Hall, who has written that "being without answers is not an embarrassment."[4]

Such clarifying and self-disclosing preaching may make another important contribution to pastoral care. Hearing preaching that wrestles honestly with issues of life and faith may help listeners feel free to approach the pastor about their own situations and questions. Preaching that models a helpful approach is at the same time powerfully invitational.

Preaching contributes to pastoral care by dealing with specific issues from time to time. In the process of developing a

worldview and modeling an approach that intertwines faith and life with insight and clarity, the pastor will of necessity also deal with specific clusters of issues. Sometimes we will do so as an outgrowth of preaching on the suggested lectionary texts; at other times, we may use the vehicle of topical preaching.

As a way of dealing with specific issues, I have found John Patton's analysis of "four human problems" helpful. He argues that these four problem areas cover most of the specific issues pastoral care addresses. He devotes a whole chapter to each of these issues: loss and limitation, patienthood, abuse (self and other), and relationships. While he affirms the role of the pastor's teaching and preaching in "creating conditions where care can take place," particularly in reference to relationships, I would broaden his affirmation of the preaching role to include all these critical areas of life. He writes that "the way the pastor understands and interprets . . . in [the] pulpit makes possible significant pastoral relationships in troubled times."[5] When we rely on biblical texts, familiar and unfamiliar, to deal with experiences of loss and grief, illness and disease, as well as with abuse and relationships, our preaching provides listeners with insight, perspective, and hope, and contributes greatly to living life to the full.

In *Freedom for Ministry*, Richard Neuhaus writes of "the church in all its thus and so-ness, in all its contradictions and compromises, in its circus of superficiality and its moments of splendor."[6] I hope that by giving attention to the potential contributions of preaching to pastoral care, the church may experience many moments of splendor.

Notes

[1] John Patton, *Pastoral Care in Context: An Introduction to Pastoral Care* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 27.
[2] C. J. Dyck, "Preaching and the Anabaptist Tradition," *Mennonite Life* 17 (January 1962): 23.
[3] Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), 68.
[4] Douglas John Hall, *The Reality of the Gospel and the Unreality of the Churches* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 163.
[5] Patton, *Pastoral Care in Context*, 200.
[6] Richard John Neuhaus, *Freedom for Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 8.

About the author

Before retiring from fulltime work, John H. Neufeld served as president of Canadian Mennonite Bible College, Winnipeg, Manitoba (1984–97), and as pastor of First Mennonite Church, Winnipeg (1969–84). While at CMBC, he taught homiletics.

"Not hearers only"
Preaching invitationally

Dennis R. Edwards

Jane, the dean of faculty at the private school where I taught mathematics and chemistry to high school students, was an atheist.[1] But she seemed intrigued with the fact that I was pastor of a newly established congregation, and she would often ask me questions about my church and my faith, as well as my political views.

On Fridays, Jane's typical question to me was, "What are you preaching about this weekend?" I hated that question. I prefer to think that I preach on biblical texts, not on topics, per se. I don't like the notion that all the thought I've put into my sermon preparation can be reduced to a sound bite or a trite ethical admonition, such as be nice, pay your tithes, or don't quit. Even so, I recognize that many people, ardent believers and atheists, ask preachers Jane's Friday question.

Preaching invitationally means helping people connect the sermon to their lives and to God's mission in the world. Invitation should be a regular part of our preaching, helping our messages move from theory to practice.

The sermonic invitation must follow practical instruction

People want to know what a sermon is about. Believers want to know what God is saying to them. They want to know what they are supposed to think and what they are to do. They want to know why they've had to pay dutiful attention to the preacher for twenty or thirty—or more!—minutes. They need to be able to connect the teachings of scripture to their daily lives. Sermons must be practical. Sermons must help people connect their thinking to their actions. Sermons need to invite people to be doers of the word and not just hearers (James 1:22).

In addressing this need for practical sermons, some pay particular attention to preaching in an African American context. For example, Cleophus J. LaRue of Princeton University observes that "black

preachers rarely spend precious time in the pulpit engaged in abstract thought. The black quest for God has been based on the immediate hopes and aspirations of an oppressed community often discouraged and beaten back by life. Thus the black congregation desires to know if there is a word from the mighty Sovereign, whose power is made known through and reflected in their everyday life experiences."[2] Indeed, one would be hard pressed to find a predominately African American church where the preaching is not heavily practical, sometimes with more emphasis on the pragmatic than on biblical exposition.

Along with the pragmatism, one should also expect to hear an invitation given from the preacher. However, the typical invitation from the African American preacher is not necessarily connected to the main points of the sermon. The typical invitation is offered to those who are not yet believers; it is a call to salvation. The practical topics raised in the sermon are put aside during the time of invitation.

The sermonic invitation is more than a call to salvation

In African American churches, the invitation often does not directly follow the sermon. The invitation usually comes after a hymn—but not just any hymn! The hymn chosen for the invitation ("Just as I Am," for example) is designed to focus on an initial conversion experience and decision to follow Christ. The part of the worship service following the sermon seems to be modeled after the old camp meetings or a Billy Graham crusade, where the goal is to see people converted and walking down the aisle. The chief form an invitation takes is that of an offer of salvation.

If the invitation focuses only on the offer of salvation to unbelievers, believers might have a strong impression of the Spirit of God working in them, but not know what to do, because they have heard only an invitation to conversion.

Yet there is a problem, in my view, when the invitation following a sermon has a focus mainly on the offer of salvation to unbelievers. That type of invitation may cause the majority of listeners to fall into the trap of thinking that the only goal of scripture and interpretation is to bring one to an initial conversion to Christ. One might think, "I'm already a believer, so everything is OK. The preacher isn't really talking to me!" Or perhaps even more likely, believers

might have a strong impression of the Spirit of God working in them through the sermon, but they may be stuck, not knowing what to do, because they have heard only an invitation to conversion.

We've all heard stories of people who on multiple occasions have prayed to receive Christ or be born again, because they don't know what else to do after having been repeatedly convicted by the Spirit of God. A prayer for conversion was all the preacher invited them to. I've been in contexts where believers were moved and did not respond to the invitation but after the service went looking for someone to help them sort through the feelings that welled up during the sermon. I wish all people were so diligent! Most people need the preacher to connect the dots.

Invitations should be connected to the practical points in the sermon and should call people to follow the Lord in particular ways. The application points made in the sermon can be reinforced in the invitation.

To be fair, that invitation to Christian discipleship, as the offer of salvation is often called, may be accompanied by an invitation to backsliders to make a renewed commitment to faith. And sometimes the preacher's invitation might include a call for people to come forward for a brief time of personal prayer with the pastor or another church leader. These are good invitations. But rarely does the invitation following a sermon go beyond the basic call for salvation. Even the call for prayer is general and often vague. Invitational preaching needs to be more specific.

My contention is that while a general invitation is better than no invitation, it would be more helpful for the preacher to offer specific invitations. Invitations should be connected to the practical points in the sermon and should call people to follow the Lord in particular ways. The application points made in the sermon can be reinforced in the invitation. More specific invitations will help listeners realize that the change the scripture calls for includes an initial repentance and conversion, yes, but also a continual turning toward the Lord. We all need to "work out our salvation" (Phil. 2:12), and we all benefit from explicit ideas about how to do that.

The sermonic invitation needs to be specific

To be sure, all sermons may have an evangelistic appeal; they all deal with the good news in some way or another. Indeed, almost every

week I make an appeal for people to begin a journey with the Lord Jesus, based on their acknowledgement of sin, their renunciation of it, and their prayerful desire to follow the Lord. But in addition to that appeal, I invite everyone—unbeliever, new believer, as well as seasoned believer—to various specific actions connected to the themes of the sermon.

I recently finished a sermon series based on the book of Hosea. That book deals dramatically and at times graphically with spiritual adultery, as God's people are accused of infidelity because of their idolatry. During the sermon that included chapter 11, I was struck with the expression of God's emotions at the end of verse 8. *The New Living Translation* renders it this way: "My heart is torn within me, and my compassion overflows." I wondered whether we think of the Lord having feelings. My invitation was for everyone to stop and think about a relationship they have had that did not work out, or one in which someone lied to them or even cheated on them. I asked them to list their feelings, and I gave them time to do so. I then asked them, "What would have to happen for trust to develop again?" I tried to make the connection between the feelings we may face in our human relationships and those feelings that God has when his people cheat on him.

Sometimes my invitations require action at that very moment. Sometimes my invitations require a visible response. Many of my invitations ask deliberation beyond the moment.

Sometimes, as on that Sunday, my invitations require action at that very moment. Sometimes my invitations require a visible response, such as coming up to an elder at the end of the service, or raising one's hand to commit oneself to a particular activity in the life of the church. However, many of my invitations ask deliberation beyond the moment. Some people are prone to make responses more emotional than substantial. Of course I want feelings to be involved, but a lasting impact requires more than emotion.

The sermonic invitation respects human diversity and congregational circumstances

When I am the guest speaker at another congregation, I am not always aware of the particular challenges that congregation is facing. Then my invitations are general. At churches that are not predominately African American, there may not be a separate time for an

invitation, so my appeal will be part of my sermon. But with my own congregation I have found it helpful to consider the following questions:

What admonition in the sermon is especially challenging for me? I figure I have many of the struggles those in my congregation have. At the least, I can rely on my capacity for empathy. Reflecting on my own struggles and the struggles of others I know helps me identify what is likely to be difficult for my congregation.

What do I need to change to help me address the challenges communicated in the sermon? Sometimes I need a change in perspective on my situation. Sometimes I need to be reminded that God is good and desires to help me. Sometimes I simply need to change certain behaviors.

What resources are available to help me make the necessary changes? Of course the Holy Spirit is willing to help me change. I also remind listeners that in a genuine community of faith we help one another tackle the challenges we face.

What type of invitation will be most helpful to my listeners? This is the hardest question for me to answer, because people differ in the ways they learn. I am a typical left-brained individual, and my natural inclination would be to invite people to *think* differently; I would give them propositions to consider. But after many years of teaching and preaching, I've observed some of the different ways people learn. Therefore my invitations sometimes require movement (coming forward to speak with an elder, for example); sometimes they require visualization (a slide of artwork designed to motivate, for example); and sometimes they require immediate interaction with another person (or other people) in the congregation.

The goal is to have listeners know that God expects some sort of response. It is God, after all, who is making the invitation to join in his mission. The preacher's task is to make the invitation clear.

One might consider many other questions when framing an invitation; these are starting points. The goal is to have listeners know that *God expects some sort of response*. It is God, after all, who is making the invitation. It is God asking us to join him in his mission, not just with an initial conversion, but in various and sundry ways, depending on the situation at the time. The preacher's task is to make the invitation clear.

Conclusion

Preaching invitationally means helping people connect the practical teaching of the sermon to their own lives and to God's mission in the world. Invitation should be a regular part of our preaching, helping our messages move from theory to practice.

As it happens, Jane, my colleague at the independent school, had lived in Alabama during the Civil Rights era. She and her husband often went to Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery to hear Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preach. Jane, an atheist, was drawn to the prophetic sermons of Dr. King that called people to specific ideals and actions. Even though Jane remained an atheist, she could not help but feel invited to look at the world differently, and that had an impact on her as an educator. So I reflect on Dr. King and other powerful preachers and consider Jane's Friday question. I may not like being asked, "What are you preaching about?" but I know I had better be preaching about something and inviting listeners to respond in tangible ways.

Notes

[1] I have changed my colleague's name to protect privacy.
[2] Cleophus J. LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 125.

About the author

Dennis R. Edwards is the founding pastor of Peace Fellowship Church in Washington, DC, a Partner in Mission with Franconia Mennonite Conference. He has a PhD in biblical studies and teaches as an adjunct professor at two area seminaries. He is the husband of Susan and father of four adult children.

Keeping preaching fresh over the long haul

Don Rempel Boschman

It is the Monday after the second Sunday of Advent. In the next seventeen days I will preach sermons on three familiar texts: the testimony of John the Baptist in John 1, the Magnficat in Luke 1, and the familiar Christmas story in Luke 2.

If I were fresh out of seminary, opening Raymond Brown's *Birth of the Messiah* for the first time, I would be excited at the prospect of studying these important texts and preaching on them in some of the best-attended Sunday services of the year. But it has been more than twenty years since I graduated from seminary, and it is my twelfth Advent series in front of this congregation. What can I say this year that I haven't said before?

Long-term pastorates pose challenges for preachers. Listeners may become bored when they have heard the preacher's most exciting personal stories and have become overly familiar with his voice, intonation, and preferred sermon structure.

Many of my colleagues are in similar situations. I am a pastor at Douglas Mennonite Church, a medium-sized congregation in Winnipeg. The three other Mennonite Church Canada congregations in the northeastern quadrant of the city have also experienced long-term pastorates. A recent study indicated that 42 percent of Mennonite Church Canada pastors have been in their present positions for six years or longer, with approximately 15 percent having been in their present positions for at least ten years.[1]

Long-term pastorates pose challenges for preachers. Listeners may become bored when they have heard the preacher's most exciting personal stories and have become overly familiar with his voice, intonation, and preferred sermon structure. The congregation's understanding of the gospel may also have narrowed as the pastor has focused most of her preaching on favorite texts and themes. The pastor might be reduced to preaching about lifestyle

issues only in generalities, because he doesn't want people in the congregation to think the sermon is aimed at them.

But not all preachers run out of energy. Last month, veteran preacher and teacher John Neufeld came by our church to use a particular commentary. John worked away in the library and came out an hour later, clearly energized. He was studying a text—on Peter at Cornelius's home—that he had certainly studied before, but he was still fascinated with the text and excited about preaching the sermon at First Mennonite, a congregation in which he has been preaching for thirty-five years.

Habits for the veteran preacher

How can a preaching ministry stay fresh and vital over the long term? What follows is not meant to be prescriptive but simply descriptive of habits I have tried to develop over the past decade.

Know how many sermons you have in you. Pastors have different capacities for preaching. If I preach more than twenty-five or thirty-five times a year, I run out of things to say. That number includes sermons at Sunday services, weddings, and funerals. I need time to absorb an idea before I can preach well. As a result, I usually decline opportunities to speak outside our congregation. One challenge for pastors is what to do with the many short meditations we are asked to give at meetings, church programs, or services in personal care homes. If we expect our meditations to be meaningful to our listeners, they should first be meaningful to us, and I for one cannot come up with fresh insight and energy every week. Each minister will have a different limit, and we each ought to know our maximum and stay within it.

If we expect our meditations to be meaningful to our listeners, they should first be meaningful to us, and I for one cannot come up with fresh insight and energy every week.

Share the load. Because of our limitations, we need to share the load. In 1997, my wife Kathleen and I became co-pastors at Douglas Mennonite Church. We quickly realized we were fortunate to be called to a congregation that has a strong tradition of reliance on lay preachers. Our predecessor was the sole salaried pastor in a congregation of 340 members, with services in German and English. With two different sermons scheduled each week, the

congregation had wisely called seven gifted lay preachers to share the preaching load. Most of the congregation enjoyed the diversity of voices and expected this pattern to continue.

Today our congregation relies less on lay preachers, but with a staff of five part-time ministers, we still hear a variety of voices from the pulpit. We have two English services with identical sermons. As the senior pastor, I preach in half of the services, approximately twenty-five Sundays per year. On the majority of the other Sundays, one of our other staff ministers preaches. Our youngest staff minister is in his early twenties, and the oldest is almost sixty. We have three men and two women as staff ministers. Lay ministers still preach occasionally, as do the young adults in the congregation whom we are training to preach. As a result, our congregation hears sermons given from a variety of backgrounds and somewhat varied theological perspectives.

Peter Taylor Forsyth wrote that the "cure for dullness in the pulpit is not brilliance but reality." Sermons need to be about something, and that something needs to be clearly stated.

While some older members have encouraged me to preach more often, I have resisted that call. Just as a recipe served too often makes diners lose interest, so too a voice and a perspective heard too frequently loses its power. Some people in the congregation may desire that I as senior pastor preach four out of five Sundays, but in the long run I believe even they would grow tired of that diet.

Plan in advance. One joy of being a long-term pastor is that you can make long-term plans. At Douglas we have experimented with a variety of planning cycles, sometimes planning as little as a month ahead and sometimes planning up to nine months ahead. As a result, I seldom feel any stress about what I am going to preach on this week. We pastors work hard to collaborate in developing sermon series. We usually decide series themes several months in advance, and all of us have been challenged to preach on texts and topics that were not our first choices.[2] Series that are suggested but not ultimately chosen we add to a list of possible future series. Instead of wondering what in the world I haven't talked about before, I almost always feel that we have more material to cover than we have time for.

Planning in advance also gives individual sermons time to develop. My sermons typically go through as few as four and as many as eight quick outlines before they are preached, and this process takes time. Dedicating two hours a day over four to six days to sermon preparation bears more fruit than does devoting ten hours on Friday.

Do serious Bible study before reaching for the commentaries. My father was a minister, my wife is a minister, and our congregation has a generous book and study allowance, so I have accumulated many biblical commentaries and other reference materials. Yet reference materials become a handicap when a preacher turns to them too early in the sermon-writing process. Spending a few days studying the text on your own is critical to understanding it. When John Neufeld came to borrow a commentary, I shouldn't have been surprised to hear that he had already been studying the text for two weeks. Secondhand knowledge is seldom as exciting as discovering things for oneself, and this difference will be evident in the pulpit.

Spending a few days studying the text on your own is critical to understanding it. Secondhand knowledge is seldom as exciting as discovering things for oneself, and this difference will be evident in the pulpit.

Keep it real. Peter Taylor Forsyth (1848–1921) wrote that the "cure for dullness in the pulpit is not brilliance but reality."[3] Sermons need to be about something, and that something needs to be clearly stated and described. Years ago, someone in our congregation challenged me to preach about domestic violence. I agreed that I should, but the resulting sermon was so vague and unfocused that perhaps only the two of us knew what I was trying to preach about.

The congregation should be in no doubt about what we are talking about. If we are preaching on materialism, we should give vivid examples: big screen TVs, cruises, and over-extended credit cards. We should give illustrations with humility and tentativeness, but we must describe the issue in ways that a child can understand. If we speak plainly and vividly, we will not struggle to hold the congregation's attention.

Keep learning. I am an avid reader, but I often forget the content of books I have read. In 2006, I enrolled in a doctor of ministry program at Fuller Theological Seminary, and I have

found that the discipline of writing papers has helped me digest new material. Each year I return from my studies in Pasadena with ideas I am excited about sharing with our congregation.

This need to keep learning applies specifically to preaching. I was twenty-four years old when I took my first preaching course at seminary. At that time, my real-life preaching experience was limited to one brief meditation at a church camp. Needless to say, although the preaching instructor was knowledgeable, I soon forgot most of the material presented in class. But I was fortunate to learn preaching skills on the job as a missionary in Botswana. By my late twenties, I was preaching weekly and learning what did and did not work. I wasn't sure why certain things were effective, but I developed a style that suited me.

After eleven years here, a sermon on adultery is difficult, because I am now preaching to friends for whom it is a painful topic. This awareness can either silence me or help my preaching be more realistic, nuanced, and focused.

More than twenty years after my first preaching course, I took a second preaching course, this time with June Alliman Yoder and John Neufeld. Perhaps they said many of the things I had heard in the first course, but now I heard them with fresh understanding. Equally helpful were John and June's comments on my videotaped sermons. Where church members are likely to just say "wonderful sermon" on their way out of the church, John and June offered pointed and informed advice for improvement. I hope to take another preaching class in the next four or five years. New books on preaching are always being published; they also suggest solutions to homiletical problems with which preachers struggle.

Conclusion

Kathleen and I became pastors at Douglas Mennonite Church in the summer of 1997. Before we arrived, the Douglas ministerial had decided to preach on the first three kings of Israel: Saul, David, and Solomon. As a result, the fourth sermon of my pastorate here at Douglas was on adultery, on the story of David and Bathsheba. I remember thinking to myself, I'm glad I'm preaching on this topic now, before I know who in the congregation is committing adultery. After more than eleven years at Douglas, a

sermon on adultery is now much more difficult, because I know of marriages in the congregation that have been tested by adultery. I am now preaching to friends for whom it is a deeply painful topic, and I feel like I am pulling scabs off partly healed wounds.

Adultery is not the only topic on which I now find it more difficult to preach. Pornography, substance abuse, marriage, homosexuality, money, children, and death are not simply subjects to be explained; they are issues with which my friends in the congregation are struggling. This awareness can either silence me or help me become more realistic, nuanced, and focused in my preaching. A long-term pastorate can be a treadmill-like experience for a preacher and a congregation, but it can also be the foundation for a focused and compassionate preaching ministry.

Notes

[1] Dieter J. Schönwetter, *2008 Mennonite Church Canada Pastoral Report* (Winnipeg: Mennonite Church Canada, 2008), 30.

[2] Our team usually develops sermon series in one of three ways: on a topic such as money, sex, or spiritual disciplines; on lectionary readings (often done during Advent or Lent); or on a section of the Bible.

[3] Quoted in Gordon MacDonald, "The Day I Brought a Skunk to Church," in *Preaching to Convince*, ed. James D. Berkley (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1986), 113.

About the author

Don Rempel Boschman has been a minister at Douglas Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, Manitoba, since 1997. From 1985 to 1996, Don worked as a missionary in Botswana in the area of theological education with African Independent Churches. He and his wife, Kathleen, have two children, Michael and Lisa.

Book review

Joanne Gallardo

In Other Words: Incarnational Translation for Preaching, by Charles H. Cosgrove and W. Dow Edgerton. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.

One of the many daunting tasks preachers face is that of opening up the scriptures in a way that facilitates meaning and understanding for our listeners. Our meaning sometimes falls flat somewhere between the pulpit and the pew. And we sometimes find ourselves in limbo between fear about losing the authenticity of scripture by daring to reinterpret, and fear about manipulating the text into cheapened relevancy. It is out of deep respect for scripture and the discipline of homiletics that Charles H. Cosgrove and W. Dow Edgerton, in *In Other Words: Incarnational Translation for Preaching,* seek to restore the sense of the living Word.

Combining hermeneutical scholarship with creativity and pragmatism, the authors offer this book as a resource to preachers who want to reach their congregations in new and exciting ways.

Cosgrove and Edgerton define incarnational translation as part recital, part homiletical commentary. As the sermon illustration assists in fitting text to time and place, incarnational translation seeks to bring a contemporary light to scripture, giving it a rhetorical effect similar to the impact it would have had on ancient listeners. *In Other Words* contains both theory and practice for this translation.

In the chapter "Psalms, Hymns, and Oracles," the authors consider the form and genre of the Psalms, hymns of the New Testament, the prophetic oracles, and the oracles of salvation. Interspersed throughout are examples of incarnational translations of well-known passages, reinterpreted and adapted in compelling ways. The NRSV translation of Amos 5:21, in which

the prophet rails against worship without justice, reads: "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies." The incarnational translation begins: "I hate your Christmas trees with their brightly colored lights and glimmering tinsel; I despise your Advent wreaths" (47). This rendering replaces the description of ancient worship with a portrayal of a contemporary North American mainstream Christmas Eve service, and ends with the words of the original translation: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream." The new version retains the essence of the old text, but the description of worship has been translated incarnationally into a setting with more meaning for the modern listener.

Criticisms of this method and questions about interpretation are sure to arise. What criteria are used to translate texts incarnationally? Does the preacher run the risk of misinterpreting the text? Does this approach lead to excessive allegorizing of scriptures? In their final chapter, Cosgrove and Edgerton briefly speak to these concerns. In straightforward fashion, they articulate their views on hermeneutic frameworks, allegorical exegesis, and the risk taking required in all translation work. These brief responses, though helpful, leave a lot to the preacher's discernment. But translation of scripture is always a risky venture, and for those who dare to preach, the risks associated with interpreting scripture are familiar.

While Eugene Peterson's *The Message* and Walter Wangerin's *The Book of God* have set texts in modern paraphrase, *In Other Words* serves as a valuable resource for preachers who seek to address their congregation with a text that lives and breathes. Combining hermeneutical scholarship with creativity and pragmatism, Cosgrove and Edgerton offer this book not as a method of preaching but as a resource to preachers who want to reach their congregations in new and exciting ways. This book can also be an excellent resource for Bible study leaders and other teachers of scripture, or for anyone who wants to see the Bible as a transformational text.

About the reviewer

A native of Wauseon, Ohio, Joanne Gallardo is completing an MDiv at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana. She is a member of College Mennonite Church and a ministry intern at Eighth Street Mennonite Church, Goshen.

Book review

Rosanna McFadden

The Preacher as Storyteller: The Power of Narrative in the Pulpit, by Austin B. Tucker. Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008.

Austin B. Tucker's *The Preacher as Storyteller: The Power of Narrative in the Pulpit* presents a toolbox of ideas and exercises for preachers. Although many writers have acknowledged the power of narrative in the Bible and in the pulpit, Tucker makes a strong case for storytelling and gives guidelines and caveats for its use.

Chapters include "The Essential Elements of Narrative," "Telling Your Own Story," "Step-by-Step to the Narrative Sermon," and "Ten Ways to Sharpen Storytelling Skills," and he devotes an entire section to brief biographies and sample sermons by historic preachers. Each of the how-to chapters ends with three exercises geared toward concrete practical application in a congregational setting. And pastoral storytelling is not limited to the pulpit: Tucker mentions therapeutic storytelling for pastoral care with adults or children, and he devotes an entire chapter to children's sermons, complete with suggestions for format, topics, and delivery.

Throughout the book, Tucker seasons with caution his encouragement to tell stories. He affirms the power of sharing one's own story but warns against too much self-disclosure. Although stories from life settings are powerful, a pastor must never use—or even refer to—a story shared in confidence by a parishioner. Tucker explores the boundary between persuasion and manipulation, and he distinguishes between personal testimony and logical argument.

Tucker presents a wide range of storytelling styles—personal testimony, third person narrative, various plot constructions, character monologue—and he encourages preachers not to rely exclusively on any single mode. He suggests keeping a card file of

"sermon seeds" drawn from sources ranging from family stories to bumper stickers. He states categorically that every sermon should be rooted in God's Word, but he does not provide tools for Bible study or say much about how to use the Bible. Instead he assumes knowledge of the Bible and an understanding of its use, and he suggests no framework—such as a lectionary—for the selection of texts. Tucker's examples of biblical applications are in the context of personal faith; he gives little sense of the power of scripture and story to inspire and transform communities. Conspicuously absent is any mention of the Holy Spirit for inspiration or guidance in sermon preparation.

The Preacher as Storyteller is a clearly written, broad-ranging resource for pastors who wish to incorporate narrative in preaching, or who are looking for ways to hone their storytelling skills.

Some readers will be distracted by the author's tacit assumption that all preachers are men. In his pantheon of great homileticians, a biography or sample sermon from a female preacher would have provided welcome variation. And Tucker refers to the great narrative tradition of African American preaching but does not treat it in detail or profile an African American in the section on storytelling masters. In a book that presents such a rich variety of narrative styles and affirms their use in preaching, these omissions are unfortunate.

The Preacher as Storyteller is a clearly written, broad-ranging resource for pastors who wish to incorporate narrative in preaching, or who are looking for ways to hone their storytelling skills. The exercises enable readers to apply the material to their practice of preaching. The book neglects some significant preaching tools, but it offers a nuts and bolts approach to narrative preaching which would make it a practical addition to any preacher's library.

About the reviewer

Rosanna Eller McFadden lives in Goshen, Indiana, and is a member of Creekside Church of the Brethren in Elkhart. She is an MDiv student at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary and was a presenter at the Biblical Storytelling Festival there in November 2008.

Book review

Ron Guengerich

Psalms, by James H. Waltner. Believers Church Bible Commentary. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2006.

Writing a commentary on the Psalms is like doing an analysis of a diverse forest that spreads across several ecosystems. The forest contains many trees, each of them distinctive. Some are of the same species or are closely related to other trees of the same genus. But some are of a totally different family. And in each ecosystem in the forest, each of the different trees stands in relationship to the community of trees that surrounds it. The different trees also form a distinctive pattern of growth.

So how do you write a commentary on 150 psalms—a forest of 150 trees—both great and small, and from different ecosystems? What comments do you make about this poetry, this collection of assorted prayers, songs, and reflections on life and God? What can you say about a forest that stretches across centuries and geographical locations? No commentary can ever be the final word; we could always say more about both the forest and the trees.

James Waltner has done a significant job of providing brief comments (after all, this is a *comment*-ary) on the 150 trees that make up this forest. Every psalm receives careful attention. The genres—lament, praise, wisdom reflection, liturgy, for example—are briefly identified but not tediously analyzed, the flow or development of the thought in the psalm is noted, and the crucial and distinctive words or word clusters are highlighted.

One of the most insightful and interesting aspects of the book is the way Waltner treats problematic issues in the Psalms. Within the comments on the Psalms he has included bracketed references—[Imprecation], for instance—that point the reader to essays at the end of the book, which address these issues in a systematic way. These essays are essential to Waltner's treatment

of the Psalms and constitute an important contribution of this book. In these essays, he deals with knotty problems that confront all Christians, but especially those espousing nonresistant and nonviolent beliefs.

Waltner's essays on vengeance, war and war images, imprecation, enemies, and wrath of God are an important resource for twenty-first century believers who are uneasy about psalm-prayers that include petitions erupting from angry, oppressed, abused, and maligned individuals and communities. These essays should be read and reread as one deals with the respective psalms. Through these essays, Waltner makes a wonderfully nuanced examination of how the psalmist prayed to God in dire, unjust situations. His conclusions are that, rightly understood and rightly spoken in the appropriate settings, these desperate and harsh psalms still have a place in our prayers today. In these essays, Waltner provides a perspective on the raging outcries in Psalm 35, 58, 59, 69, or 109, for example, that can help us reclaim this "dangerous language" as an appropriate appeal to the God who has true authority and responsibility to deal with atrocities and injustices. References to other authors, whose work Waltner cites in these short essays, provide the inquiring reader with resources for delving deeper into these perplexing and troubling issues.

Trusted commentators point us in the right direction, so that we can carry on their work. Waltner has pushed us to reconsider that all of scripture is profitable to us, even the psalms that petition God for vindication.

At the end of each commentary on an individual psalm, under the heading "The Text in the Biblical Context and the Life of the Church," Waltner provides observations about how this particular psalm fits into the forest of the rest of scripture. These helpful notes place the Psalms both within the larger canonical context and within the liturgical and theological worlds the Psalter helped shape. Seldom does one find notes this concise and suggestive in an exegetical commentary.

This commentary is a fitting memorial to James Waltner's powers of observation and deep love of scripture. This volume is the pile of stones that reflects a labor of persistent examination, deep regard for scripture, and practical wisdom about how the Psalms continue to be germane to our lives.

All commentaries are incomplete, but the trusted commentators are the ones who point us in the right direction, so that we can carry on their work. Waltner has pushed us to reconsider that all of scripture is profitable to us, even the psalms that petition God for vindication. I am confident that James Waltner would say Amen to adding Jesus' parable about the persistent widow (Luke 18:1–8) to prayers for justice and prayers of imprecation. After the widow's prayer, "Vindicate me against my adversary," Jesus asks the enigmatic question, "But when the Son of Man returns, will he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8). Will we have the faith to pray all these prayers, even the prayers for vindication?

About the reviewer

Ron Guengerich is on the pastoral team at Silverwood Mennonite Church, Goshen, Indiana, and taught at Eastern Mennonite Seminary and Hesston College after doing doctoral studies in Old Testament at the University of Michigan.

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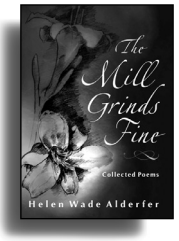

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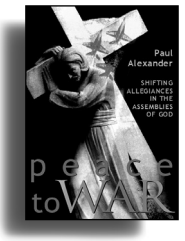

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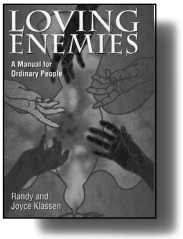

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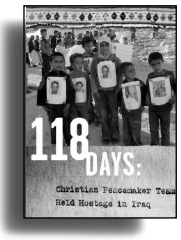

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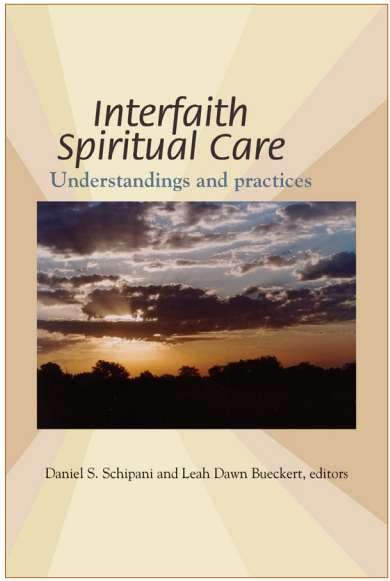

Interfaith and Spirtual Care:
Understanding and Practices
— *Daniel S. Schipani and Leah Dawn Bueckert, Editors*
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The twofold overarching concern of the project leading to this publication is to foster reflection and enhance the practice of inter-faith spiritual care in health care institutions and beyond. Endorsed by the Society for Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counseling, the book meets the following goals:

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• to identify reliable guidelines for competent practice and duly contextualized interfaith spiritual care;

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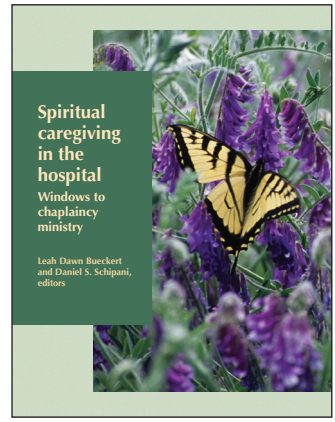

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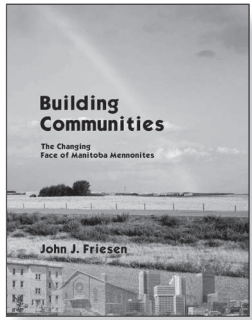

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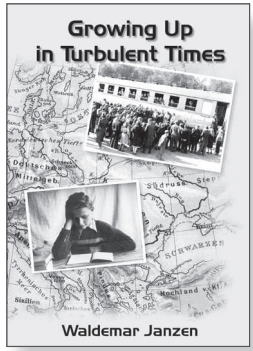

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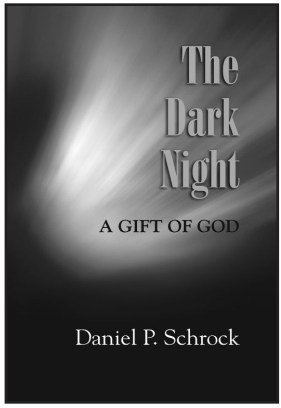

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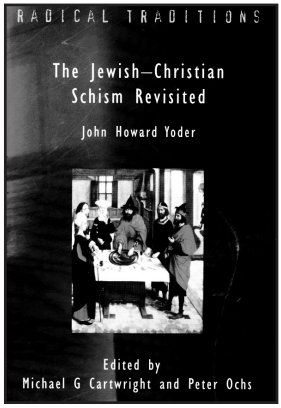

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