

HONESTY IN PREACHING: SILENCE AND SPEECH

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Listen, my people,
mark each word.
I begin with a story,
I speak of mysteries
welling up from ancient depths,
heard and known from our elders.

We must not hide
this story from our children
but tell the mighty works
and all the wonders of God.

. . . .

Let future generations learn
and let them grow up
to teach their young
to trust in God,

remembering great deeds,
cherishing the law.

Not like their ancestors,
stubborn, bitter, wavering,
unfaithful to God.

. . . .

They forgot all God had done,
wonders revealed to them.

. . . .

Yet God, in compassion,
did not destroy them,
but held back anger,
restrained fury,
forgave their sin.
God remembered their weakness,
flesh as fragile as breath.

Psalm 78:1-4, 6-8, 11, 38-39
*The Psalter: A Faithful and
Inclusive Rendering*
(Liturgy Training Publications,
1995)

The preacher has only one Word to speak, one Story to tell, one Mystery to proclaim. It is the Word of the Holy Three, the Story of God's Word made manifest among us, the Mystery of God, out of compassion for our weakness, becoming flesh as fragile as breath, that we might not be destroyed, but forgiven and given new life. In other words, all of God's mighty works and wonders unfold among us, God's infinite mercy is poured out upon us, and God's very heart opened to us through the life, death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. And as Gordon Lathrop writes: "Preaching gives the very gift of mercy of which it speaks, enabling faith in its hearers to trust that gift."

But how does preaching give this gift and speak of this mystery heard and known from our elders? How shall the preacher tell the story of God's boundless compassion for earth and her frail and breathy children to those who have never heard, and to those who know it best? Where are the words for speaking the Word that speaks light into darkness, beauty into chaos, freedom into fear, and life into death?

What aids the preacher, week after week, in "handing over Christ Jesus and his benefits?"

Gordon Lathrop, *Holy People:
A Liturgical Ecclesiology*
(Fortress Press, 1999) p. 78

Or put another way, what hinders and what helps the evangelical preacher in offering God's mercy in Jesus Christ to a stubborn, wavering, unfaithful people in a way that enables faith in them to trust this gift?

I begin with a story.

On January twenty-sixth, in the year of our Lord two thousand, three weeks after the feast of the Epiphany, I had an out-of-body experience. I had flown from Washington state to Atlanta, Georgia, to record four sermons to be aired at later dates on the Protestant Hour, an ecumenical radio ministry. For each sermon I had been given one text – the Gospel reading appointed in the Revised Common Lectionary – and seventeen minutes, no more, no less. The preacher, or as the sound technician referred to me, “the talent” (as in, “Want a Coke? We like to keep the talent happy.”) was to read the gospel, preach a sermon, and pray a prayer. The producer would tend to all other details, including opening and closing the segment with an instrumental version of “A Mighty Fortress,” signaling to the listeners that it was a Lutheran preaching this time, not a Methodist, Presbyterian, or Episcopalian, the other partners in this ministry.

I entered a small, windowless room, smelling of stale air and the sweat of former preachers. The lighting was low and yellowish, the walls and ceiling covered in acoustical tile. Insulating

PREACHING IS ALWAYS AT RISK OF BECOMING DISCONNECTED FROM THE VERY THINGS IT NEEDS TO BE AUTHENTIC AND LIFE-GIVING

pads blanketed every hard surface, including the table at which I sat facing a microphone. The room was swaddled against all noise from outside and any extraneous sounds from within. The heavy door closed. I was alone.

I began to read the Gospel for the Second Sunday of Easter, John 20, beginning at the 19th verse: “When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear...”

I glanced at the door. Had they locked it? I wondered, my old demon claustrophobia rising like heat within me. A deep, disembodied voice broke the silence, startling me and saying, “Don't turn away from the microphone. Sit very still. Let's take it from the top.”

Will the microphone pick up the pounding of my

heart? I worried, as I continued reading, “Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ After he said this he showed them his hands and side.”

“Slow down. Take a breath.” The voice spoke. “Your esses are hissing.”

“Peace be with you,” I began again. “Even as the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he said this, he breathed upon them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them.’”

“Could you deliver that line with a little more energy, a little more intensity? This is a major point here, a major point.”

An eternity sped by or a couple of hours crept by as I spoke into the microphone and watched as the words were swallowed whole by the acoustical tile. Digitized and laid down, as they say. Lost in the void, it seemed to me. I felt disoriented. What time was it? Which sermon was this? Were we still in Easter? Were we back in Lent now? Or had we moved past the Feast of the Pentecost into ordinary time?

Were there any images strong enough to batter down that heavy door, or sharp enough to pierce the shell of this sound-proof room, much less the self-protective shells surrounding the hearts and minds of any hearers who might tune in next April and hear my disembodied voice? I longed for words winsome enough to win their way into the hearts of those who would listen while driving distractedly to work some Sunday in May, or while sitting alone one June morning in a nursing home room trying to remember the name of the nice young man who had brought the little radio as a gift, or while trembling behind a door locked for fear of one thing or another.

Who were these people, these nameless, faceless listeners who knew neither me nor one another? They would never gather together anxious and thirsting for a word of peace, bound and wanting the forgiveness that would free them to unbind others, winded and waiting for the quickening breath of the Holy Spirit. How, then, would this Mystery be made manifest among them? Would they know the peace of Christ without the wounded hands of others reaching out to them? Could they come to faith, to deeper faith, if they remained like Thomas that first Easter evening, disconnected from his companions, having his own out-of-body experience? How could they trust God's mercy if they could not touch it, taste it, take it into themselves in bread and wine?

I had neither cup to offer nor any body with whom to break bread. Isolated in that room, insulated from everything outside that room, I was having an out-of-body experience: A preacher without a call, speaking to a people who was no people, pointing to a cup that was no cup, sending them into a place that was every place and no place at some unknown time. This experience reminded me that preaching is always at risk of becoming disconnected from the very things it needs to be authentic and life-giving. In their absence, I became newly aware of the many gifts that have been given to those who preach. I will name and open a few of those gifts, you could name and open others.

The gift of the call

The first gift preachers have been given is a *call* from a particular *people*. This call is the beginning of an on-going conversation between a people and a pastor bound to one another by promises: "The Lord be with you." "And also with you." The rite for the installation of a pastor in the *Occasional Services* book is full of mutual promise-making.

Occasional Services (Augsburg Fortress, 1982) pp. 224f

People and pastor promise to receive, uphold, encourage, and pray for one another in their respective callings. This call, these promises at once bind the pastor and set her free.

The call binds the pastor to this Word, this Story, and no other. The preacher is not free to tell just any story however engaging, to promote a program however edifying or a cause however worthy. And by their call, the whole assembly resists the lure of the marketplace where the one who preaches is "the talent" and people are the audience, critics, or fan club. The preacher need not please the crowd nor prove herself each week, as if this sermon could sever or seal their relationship. She need not fear speaking the Word, the whole word, including the hard word. Martin Luther, in his preface to the Old Testament, called Scripture the swaddling cloths and manger that hold the dear treasure of Christ, but elsewhere he called it the sheath that holds the sword of God's Word, the sword that pierces the heart, but does not destroy, cuts in order to cure, rends asunder and breaks the power of all other swords, thus mending what has been rent. Called and held in promise, the preacher is free and bound to speak this Word.

The rite of installation includes an opportunity for the presiding minister to walk with the newly installed pastor from font to ambo to table and for a representative of the assembly to meet them at each place and to hand the pastor signs of her calling – a shell, a Bible, a cup and plate. This is the journey the pastor will make each Sunday, leading this community gathered around water, word, bread and wine in its worship and praise of God. These are the signs he will touch, these the mysteries she will steward. We call you to tend these things among us, the people say to their pastor, for here God has promised to meet us and give us the life we need. Again the call both binds and frees the pastor. It binds him to these tasks primarily and to the ministry that flows from them. At the same time it frees him from the tyranny of every other task placed before him. When one knows what is central, other things fall into place, and some things simply fall away.

This journey also makes visible the place and role of preaching in the Sunday gathering. In the sermon the pastor “breaks open” the lessons that have been read that the people be fed, or “draws” the gospel up from the pool of the lessons and pours it out upon a dusty, thirsty people. Just as he drew water from the font’s well and poured it out upon the people in the name of the triune God as they gathered. Just as he will lift and break the bread – itself a gathering of scattered grain, a binding of ground kernels – at the table that they might receive into themselves this story. All of this is one proclamation, placing in the eyes, ears, hands, hearts, noses, and mouths of the community the One spoken against, lifted up, broken, poured out, and present among them, for them now.

The sermon amidst the liturgy

So the *liturgy* itself, welling up from ancient depths, fresh and alive among us, is another gift to the preacher, an aid in his call to hand over Christ and his benefits. This might seem so obvious it needn’t be mentioned, and yet my experience in the recording studio is more common among us than we would like to admit. We all have heard or preached sermons that seemed to have been packaged and inserted into the liturgy without reference to anything that preceded or followed. Like the soloist with her hand-held mic and her ill-chosen offertory song, such a sermon is a liturgical non sequitur. It is a discrete entity unrelated to the rest of worship – seventeen minutes of solid air-time; if you missed it on the radio, you can order the CD. At its best preaching is one integrated part of the proclamation and praise of the whole liturgy, drawing power from and giving strength to the other parts.

Again, the rite for the installation of a pastor helps us open the gift of the liturgy. At the font a representative of the people says, “You have been called to be among us to baptize, to teach and to forgive sins. Receive this shell as a sign of your calling.”

Hear in these words, the people say, our longing to be drawn, again and again, to this Spirit-stirred water, to be reminded of and to experience anew its welcome and washing, our dying and rising, the embrace of God, the clothing of Christ, the sealing of the Holy Spirit. We are a stubborn, wavering people, forever wandering to other wells to seek our selves and know our worth. Immerse us, and all who come seeking newness of life, in the creating, healing, freeing Word in whom we are hidden in the heart of the Holy One–Holy Three.

At the ambo another speaks, “You have been called to be among us to proclaim the Good News. Receive this Bible as a sign of your calling.”

Receive this book, they are saying, which we confess holds for us God's living, life-giving Word. Open this rich mine among us that our poverty be met with the treasure of God's mercy, priceless, costly and free. Bend low, reaching into this manger, its narratives and poetry, liturgies and letters, images and stories, and rise to place in our waiting arms the Word, life as fragile as breath and stronger than death. Like our ancestors, we forget all God has done, wonders revealed to us. We are fearful of the life that waits on the other side of our shut doors. We are filled with demons rising like heat within us. Tell again the story, heard and known from our elders, that we might grow to trust in God, to teach our young the way of life, and serve the world God so dearly loves.

And at the table, "You have been called to be among us to lead worship and preside at Holy Communion. Receive this cup and plate as signs of your calling."

Hear a hungry people crying out to taste and see the goodness of God, a thirsty people longing for the compassion of God. At this table we would take into ourselves the death of Jesus, receiving in the broken bread the wounds of the whole world and the truth of our own dying. We would also take in Christ's resurrection, drinking deeply from the cup of new life poured out for us and for all people. As you open all of Scripture to us, our hearts burning with the presence of Jesus, so also break the bread among us that we might see him face-to-face in our meeting. Then, only then, will we leave this gathering, sent back on the roads of our lives to become, for the sake of the life of the world, all that we have received: Christ's body blessed, broken, given, and raised.

PREACHING IS ONE INTEGRATED PART OF THE PROCLAMATION AND PRAISE OF THE WHOLE LITURGY

The lectionary is treasure and taskmaster

The ambo, the place of proclamation, holds the book. Indeed in earlier times the ambo was called the Table of the Word, reminding the worshipers that the Scriptures are food that nourish and sustain the community, the Body of Christ. But which texts shall be read? And when? Who decides? And why? A *common lectionary* is a priceless gift for preaching. Each week we are given the treasure of three texts. Texts that open to us the rhythm and richness of the liturgical year. Not to mention the salutary way the lectionary disciplines our study and prayer, drawing us into the whole of scripture and saving us from dwelling only in those places and passages in which we feel most at home.

These readings also connect our gathering to an ecumenical communion of gatherings, all reading and hearing the same texts on Sunday, making audible each particular assembly's home in the wider body. We are forever forgetting that while the Church does exist wherever the Word is preached and the Sacraments administered, the Church is larger than any individual gathering, any specific denomination. A common lectionary guards against our sectarian impulses, and helps prevent our particularity from devolving into parochial, self-protective isolation. It widens our vision, stretches our imagination, and deepens our prayer by placing us in relationship with others and their needs.

Furthermore, the readings invite us into a lively conversation as the texts converse with one

another, sometimes supporting, sometimes correcting, or challenging each other. While preaching on John 20 in the sound-proof booth, I was reminded why one text is not enough. The first reading for the Second Sunday of Easter had the power to open wide the doors to that house where the disciples had met in fear. It was a vision of the future into which they were being called, sent. It was a picture of another Christian community in Acts 4. The apostles gave their testimony of the resurrection. Grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them for they held all things in common. They were of one heart and soul. Here the fear-bound and inward-turned disciples of John 20 are met by a grace-filled community living in equity and unity, living as a counter-sign in a world captivated by greed, motivated by self-interest, and in bondage to fear.

“How good it is, how wonderful, wherever people live as one! There God gives blessing: life for ever.” The people sing in response to this vision, this future, making their own the praise of Psalm 133.

But wait, there is yet a third text: 1 John 1. Yes, this text says, confirming John 20, we have heard it, seen it, touched it. And now we declare it to you: the Word that speaks light into darkness also breathes life into death. The crucified and risen One brings us into communion with one another and with God.

But beware, 1 John says to Acts 4, you have a tendency to gloss the truth. We are not of one mind and soul living in peace, unity, and equity. There are needy, hungry ones among us and all around us. Indeed, if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves. The sword cuts. The truth is out. We recognize ourselves. But not yet the whole truth. For “if we confess our sin, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

And Jesus comes, as Jesus always comes, unimpeded by the walls we build or the doors we lock, opening his wounded hands, speaking peace, and breathing into us our second wind, the Holy Spirit. Or as David Ford puts it in his book, *Self and Salvation*, “God acts; Jesus comes; the disciples are transformed.” *This* is the Mystery opening among us: God, out of compassion for our weakness, becomes flesh as frail as breath, that we might not be destroyed, but have abundant life. And because of Christ, we are sent to live *even now* the promised future of God’s justice, unity, and joy.

Like a composer working within the structure of a fugue or a poet within the meter of a sonnet, the preacher, blessedly bound by these three readings, experiences great freedom in preparing a sermon. Will it be shaped by narrative hermeneutics and imagination theory à la Richard Eslinger or by the chains of metaphors or deep images elucidated by Gail Ramshaw? Will it follow a homiletical plot with a “Lowry loop,” make a Buttrick “move” from a mode of immediacy to a mode of reflection, or present a Craddock “recasting” of the biblical story? Will it be structured by Luther’s “law and gospel” dialectic or George Hoyer’s “point, problem, power” framework? These questions will be answered differently from week to week, place to place, depending upon the given lections and the life of the community. But all of these are tools available for the one who preaches to use in service of the call to proclaim Christ and him crucified and risen.

Proclamation in time and place

At the heart of the Mystery of the Incarnation, which alone opens to us the Mystery of the Trinity, stands the “scandal of particularity,” the foolishness of God, the stumbling block of Jesus

David Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed*, (Cambridge University Press, 1999) p. 213

Cf. David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures*, (Fortress Press, 1987); Richard L. Eslinger, *Narrative Imagination: Preaching the Worlds that Shape Us*, (Fortress Press, 1995); Eugene Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*, (Abingdon, 1980) and *How to Preach a Parable: Designs for Narrative Sermons*, (Abingdon, 1989); Gail Ramshaw, *Christ in Sacred Speech: The Meaning of Liturgical Language*, (Fortress Press, 1986) and *Preaching the Images*, (Fortress Press, 2000).

our frail and finite flesh is a gift, blessed and beloved by God, and the resurrection declares that our finitude is received into the very life of God.

The pastor is called to preach the Gospel to a particular people in a particular place at a specific time. These particularities – *persons, place* and *time* – are a constellation of gifts, gifts broken open and transformed in the presence of God. Preaching is timed – not as in “seventeen minutes, no more, no less” – but rooted in human history and time. One of the most disorienting aspects of my out-of-body experience was its time-out-of-time dimension. This was no *kairos* moment breaking into the forward march of *chronos*, nor simply jet lag from crossing three time zones. I was in a place where the sun didn’t shine or set, where the tides of the sea, phases of the moon, and the seasons of the earth were denied, where it was Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and ordinary time all at once and not at all.

Cut off from these the preacher loses her compass, like the seafarer on a cloudy night who loses sight of the north star. For all time is met and transformed in Jesus. His life, death, and resurrection are the “knot in time” that binds heaven to earth, the infinite to the finite, God to humanity, the past to the present to the future, and us to one another and the whole creation. Baptism brings us into the epoch-making event of Christ Jesus. And our lives forever united with his, are “timed” by his death and resurrection. The seasons of the earth, both fallow and fecund, are brought into worship and timed anew, becoming as it were, in the seasons of the liturgical year, both fasting and festal, proclamations of the Mystery, the Story, the Word: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Proclamation is not only timed, but placed. Grounded in the life of a particular community, it does not float like an epiphyte on the air of concepts and ideas, doctrinal propositions, or

JESUS' LIFE, DEATH, AND RESURRECTION ARE THE “KNOT IN TIME” THAT BINDS HEAVEN TO EARTH

spiritual truths, but is rooted in bone and blood, dust, grit, and heavy carnal clay. Luther visited the barber and milkmaid and mother listening to the language, the idioms of marketplace, farm and home, in order to translate scripture into words they would recognize as their own, so they could hear the Word as spoken to them, for them in their weakness, flesh as frail as breath.

So too the preacher must know the daily dust and grit of her community, the bone and the blood of the people who called her. She cannot speak a word of freedom if she has only a vague idea of what holds them bondage. She cannot offer reconciliation if she cannot name the divides among them. She needs to know with some clarity the demons that rise like heat within them and the root of the fear that makes them huddle together behind locked doors. To the deathbed, then, and the birthing stool, to the workplace, playground, home, and school the preacher goes, in times of loss and times of celebration, when promises are made and when they are broken, when the faithful are wavering and when they are full of wonder.

Day by day, face to face with those among whom she preaches, in the places of their living and dying, the pastor hears and receives the very words she will need to speak as the community gathers to receive from the Lord great and abundant mercy. She brings these to her preaching, setting them beside the words of the readings where they are met and broken open and made new in the face of the one Word. For in this One we all are newly “placed” under the water,

around a table, in the company of one another, in the presence of our enemy, face to face with Jesus in whose face we see the glory of God.

Sent to know this world differently

After the recording session in Atlanta was over, I walked down a hill, past an Emory University retirement community, over a little stream in a red clay draw and into a grocery store where I bought some sushi and a beer for dinner and a bagel for my breakfast. Heading back to my motel, I stopped a stranger to ask directions. He could go that way, he said, and would walk with me. He told me what had been happening in his home town while I had been in the sound-proof room. Coca-Cola, headquartered there, had announced a major cut back of its work force, eliminating jobs at every level of its operation. Just about everybody knew somebody whose job was in jeopardy. Lots of people had been without power after a big ice storm a couple of weeks earlier, now they were gearing up for another storm, a worse one. Delta might be grounded, he said. Hartsfield airport closed. Maybe I should get out while I could, before the crush of fans came to town for the Super Bowl.

Super Bowl. So *that's* what time it is in Atlanta, I thought. Restaurateurs and dishwashers, hotel managers and housekeepers, tee-shirt venders, parking lot attendants, cab drivers and a thousand other laborers probably were banking on the business. Others were undoubtedly dreading the weekend, remarkable each year for the number of domestic violence incidents reported.

This was the stuff of life in Atlanta, Georgia on January 26, the year of our Lord 2000. This and lots of other stuff shaped the people who would gather – or not – on the following Sunday. This was the world into which people would be sent to tend to their daily work, picking up the pieces after a storm or a football game, sorting through the casualties, trying to restore electrical power to homes, or hope to those whose jobs were gone, or whose faces had been battered, lives shattered. For we are not sent from worship to live in a different world, but to see and know this world differently, to live in the world in a new way because of what we have seen and heard, touched and tasted in our gathering.

God who faces us to bless us, whose glory is seen in the face of the crucified One, turns our faces toward one another in love. This is our daily vocation: facing the other, the stranger, the enemy with the same hospitality, compassion, mercy, and love we ourselves have received. For not only the pastor has a call, all of the baptized are called to love God and serve the neighbor. As the Father sent Jesus, so we are sent across the divides, into the flood and through the fire, out of every isolated, insulated room, every house with its doors locked for fear into the world, divided, drowning, in flames, and afraid, to speak peace into anxious hearts, to unbind others from the death bands of guilt and shame, to reach with wounded hands to those who suffer injustice and grief, and to breathe the Spirit's blessing.

For the many years Pastor John Vannorsdall preached on The Protestant Hour, he, too, sat in that sound-proof room and offered up his meager words to the microphone and the acoustical tile while, as he once wrote, “the producer ate a sandwich and the engineer drifted.”

“Radio sermons are far from the wholeness that is the assembly of believers,” Pastor Vannorsdall writes. “There is no Lord's Supper or Baptism, voices are not raised together in hymns and prayers, and the face of the preacher cannot be seen. *Nevertheless*, the gospel is shared

John Vannorsdall, "Over Mere Words the Holy Spirit Hovers," in *God's Story is My Story: Essays on Hearing and Telling the Word*, ed. Walter Wangerin Jr. (ELCA) p. 22

in words and images created by words, and is laid in the manger of the daily lives of tens of thousands of people. The consequences of such preaching are mostly unknown, but the biblical witness is to be trusted. Out of this so modest preaching God brings forth faith and understanding."

Again Vannorsdall: "A few years ago I received a letter from a man who had been a soldier in Vietnam. He reported that he was able to receive The Protestant Hour on his small radio, even in the rice paddies. 'Though I was not then a believer,' he wrote, 'that half hour provided the one sane voice in the midst of the carnage.' He is not alone in his appreciation of the broadcast ministry of the church. Over mere words, shaped in the anguish of late-night preparation, the Holy Spirit hovers."

When we reached the motel I asked the kind stranger if he would like some of the sushi, showing him the plastic container of neatly arranged rice and raw fish. He looked at it with appropriate wariness.

Umm. No, he didn't think so, but thanks anyway.

How about the beer?

No, ma'am, he shook his head solemnly. He had not had steady work for the past several years, but he had been clean and sober for longer than that.

The bagel then.

Yes, yes the bagel it would be.

"Peace be with you," I said to him.

"Yeah. You too," he replied. Then, reaching across a dozen continental divides, he offered me his hand, his beautiful, wounded, black hand. I accepted his hand into mine and he covered the back of mine with his other hand, warmly patting it. "You too," he nodded, then respectfully turned away when he saw my eyes fill with tears. "You too."

Over mere words the Holy Spirit hovers.

What I have tried to describe might be called "liturgical preaching": the task of handing over Christ and his benefits to a particular people gathered in the name of the Triune God around Word and sacrament. A community *calls* a pastor to preach in their midst. Both pastor and people draw courage for the task of speaking and hearing the Word from their mutual *promise-making* in the presence of God.

Liturgical preaching does not stand alone; it is not the preacher's "solo" in the "spotlight." Situated inside the Sunday liturgy, the sermon is part of the whole community's worship and praise of God. The texts of a common lectionary are blessed boundaries within which the preacher works. These readings, surrounded and supported by daily and seasonal propers and images, help the preacher tell the One Story in a variety of ways from season to season, shining light from this angle, then that, then another upon the unfathomable Mystery, the Eternal Word with us.

Such preaching arises from and speaks into the real lives of the hearers. It sends us into a world we are called to both embrace and resist. It empowers us to faithfully fulfill our baptismal vocations in the various places we live and work, study and serve. It opens our hearts to God's wonders and our eyes to God's reign breaking in even here and now.