



Gail Ramshaw is a scholar of liturgical language and professor of religion at LaSalle University. She served as the Lutheran representative on the Consultation on Common Texts commission that developed the Revised Common Lectionary. Among her publications are *Reviving Sacred Speech* and *God beyond Gender*.

PREACHING WITH IMAGES

Gail Ramshaw

Let me begin by saying that I am not a preacher. In fact, I never preach. I am a Lutheran laywoman, and, in accord with the Augsburg Confession, since I have not been called by a parish community and ordained to be its pastor, I neither preside at the eucharist nor preach. It strikes me as odd that some Lutherans honor this discipline when it comes to presiding at eucharist, yet allow practically anyone to preach, as if preaching were not a response to a call, as if preaching is getting up and saying whatever you think, as if preaching is easy. Preaching, however, in the Lutheran tradition, is indeed a response to a call, and I don't mean by that a telephone call; nor, for Lutherans, is preaching a discourse of personal opinion or a narration of personal experience. And preaching is not easy.

I propose today to suggest to you my understanding of preaching in the Lutheran tradition, especially as it utilizes the remarkable three-year lectionary, and to explain to you what I mean by "preaching with images." I will then offer you several examples of such imagery from the Sunday lectionary. And for those of you in this audience who, like me, do not preach: these images are also for us. We explore these images on Sunday morning, we sing them in the hymns, perhaps we see these images depicted in art on the bulletin (rather than, for example, a line drawing of the outside of our church building); indeed, we live with and within the images throughout the week. If I am right, these lectionary images will help us live, and live abundantly.

Preaching

Those of you who are preachers have studied homiletics. Depending on what seminary you attended during which decade, you were exposed to certain suggestions about what preaching is. For example, some of you were required to write out your sermons as if they were essays, while others of you were forced to speak extempore whether you were terrified or not. The suggestions from your homiletics course merged with what you had already thought about preaching. Indeed, perhaps your previous impression of the preacher's task was what brought you to seminary in the first place. And those of us who are not preachers have, as well, formed our sense of what preaching is by our life's experience of a succession of preachers, some outstanding, some adequate, a few abominable. As well, granting the diverse denominational background of many Lutherans these days, we have considerable experience with various traditions of Christian preaching, from ecstatic Baptist calls to conversion, to succinct Roman Catholic homilies about the moral life, to meditations at ecumenical retreats on inner spirituality. Perhaps we have read in the church fathers and been astonished by what they considered preaching to be. Granting all

these different ideas as to what preaching it, it is important for me here to offer my working definition of lectionary liturgical preaching.

First, as a Lutheran, I take preaching to be the extremely difficult task of the ordained clergy to lay out before us all what our tradition has called “the law and the gospel,” that is, both the grim truth about the human condition and the good news that the triune God offers us all abundant life. Over the centuries, that grim truth and that abundant life have had many names. To childless Abraham, God gave life through a son. To the warrior David, God gave a throne. To the sick there comes healing; to the sinner, forgiveness; to the existentially alone, community; to the dying, eternal life with God. To those fearful of God the Father, the gospel is found in Christ. To those distant from Christ, the gospel is realized in the Spirit of the baptized community. The task of the preacher is to find that good news in the Scripture and to present it in language that the people can hear and receive.

Second, as a liturgist, I take preaching to be one of many parts of the communal liturgy of the baptized community. The hearers are not strangers to the message; rather, they are already committed participants in the liturgical community of which the preacher is one member. Lastly, as a fervent proponent of the three-year lectionary, I take preaching to be an opening up of the readings of the day as prescribed by the lectionary. The preacher participates along with an increasing number of Christians around the world in responding to several readings from the Scriptures. The preacher is not alone, exploring a private vision or expounding a personal spirituality. Rather, the preaching inserts this community, along with countless other Christian assemblies around the world, into the good news of the triune God for the world, as found in a set of readings that the whole church, clergy and lay alike, own and explore, meditate on and struggle against.

The three-year lectionary

I remember as a small child, worshiping in a Missouri Synod church, poring over the pages in the front of *The Lutheran Hymnal* that listed the readings for each Sunday, with the introit, the gradual and the collect. Already the lectionary interested me: here was a part of the liturgy wholly available to me. I could prepare the evening before by checking the readings. I could know what was going on. I went on to college at Valparaiso University, where in the 1960s the theology department had masterminded a systematics course for freshmen that was based on the old one-year Sunday lectionary – quite a feat, considering that each year the calendar might be some Sundays different from the previous year. Do you remember that lectionary, one not far different from the medieval Catholic one that Luther advocated: only two readings, and none from the Hebrew Scriptures? Our new three-year lectionary is grounded in John. Around each year’s festivals in John are three main branches, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Lutheran use of the three-year lectionary prescribes a first reading that in some way attaches to the gospel reading. For the festival half of the year, the second reading as well grows from the gospel; for the non-festival half of the year, the epistles are read semi-continuously. The lectionary is based on the church’s traditional hermeneutical principle that Scripture interprets Scripture. That is, it is not only this preacher who interprets Mark 6 this week, but also Ezekiel, the psalmist and Paul. I consider the Revised Common Lectionary to be an outstanding ecumenical development within the church. It is not perfect, and of course we all have our complaints, our “if I had been on

that committee...” speeches. But it is easier to complain than to design, and I judge this lectionary to be the worthiest lectionary scheme thus far practiced by the church.

Images

Now let me explain what I mean by “images.” Those of you who enjoyed courses in literature or who read poetry or who analyze contemporary film know that images are containers of meaning. Each image is like a bowl filled with meaning. In the cabinet in your dining room are some bowls: one cut-glass treasure, a wedding gift your grandmother received; a pottery bowl, bought from the artist last year while on vacation; a bowl with fluted edges, perfect for a summer fruit salad. Each one comes from some one, from some place, bringing with it some meaning – at least until the family forgets the story behind it – especially appropriate for certain uses. Where is that one small plain glass bowl? Ah, it was commandeered last Ash Wednesday for dispensing the ashes. And after the divorce, we get rid of that blue oval bowl, since the associations are too painful. Images are like these bowls: they come from somewhere, bringing with them a history of meaning – but do we remember these meanings? – and holding together what we share. I have heard it said that we cannot share a handful of water with one another unless the water is in a bowl. So images, like these bowls, carry meaning from one person, one preacher, one generation of believers to another.

Psychologists tell us that images function in the individual human psyche to contain meaning, so that the image of, let’s say, “father” or “mother” is different for you than for me, the bowl

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filled with “fathering” or “mothering” made by religion, culture, education, personal experience, what-all. Sociologists tell us that images function in the collective human society to contain meaning. Thus a community must decide what is the meaning of the image of, say, the Christmas tree: is it a celebration of

Christ’s birth, or a symbol for the winter solstice? One way to understand a religion is to see it as a system of images: images for the divine, images for the human person, images for communal life and for our inevitable suffering and death. The religious community is the assembly of those persons who pass around a bowl each week, each year, to remind one another: these are the meanings that matter.

Preaching with images

Lutherans have tended to keep their preaching more focused on the Bible than not. It is, fortunately, rare to hear a Lutheran sermon that does not at least present itself as an exposition of a biblical passage. But our question is: how do we, as post-Enlightenment interpreters, preach the gospel from the Scriptures? I grew up in a fundamentalist arm of Lutheranism. The readings were preached as if they presented factually accurate accounts of God’s people. It was as though we believed the stories because they really happened, as if faith was accepting the historical facticity of the Bible. But Luther himself was no fundamentalist, quite willing to value books of the Bible for how clearly they pointed the church to Christ. It is disingenuous of contemporary Lutherans to study the Bible using the historical-critical method and then on Sunday morning

to pretend that biblical accounts are factual. When I hear preaching that treats the book of Mark as if it were an audio tape of Jesus' ministry, I fear for the future of the church, a church apparently unwilling to be confronted by what the Bible really is and to struggle towards the gospel within its ups and downs, its obscurities and its brilliancies.

And so I suggest that we attend to the images. Let us take for an example Christ's feeding of the multitude. In lectionary year B we all attend for five weeks in a row to this story. We cannot with honesty pretend that John's version is a factual report of a day in Jesus' life. Nor ought we take easy refuge in that famous (or is it infamous?) nineteenth-century solution: the point of the story is to remind us to share with each other the bread and fish we have stashed in our backpack. I urge that we attend to the image. The gospel comes to us in the words of the image of food: we all need food for life, and we remind one another that we all need God for abundant life. God gives life: not primarily a life after death – that's a Greek philosophical idea. Rather, the biblical idea is that this life, our daily life, is a gift from God, and that in God life never ends.

So we come to five weeks of John 6. Week one: Jesus gives food to the people, exactly as did Elisha, thanks to help from God. Week two: This weekly bread, our daily bread, is, like the manna of old, food from God. Week three: God will feed us so that like Elijah we can continue our challenging journey. Week four: Jesus is like Sophia of old, serving up bread and wine for the life of the world. Week five: Our choice is like that of the Israelites of old. Will we choose this bowl filled with meaning, or a different bowl? This bread and cup of life, or another?

The story of Christ's feeding the multitude is, it seems to me, not about whether Jesus really worked miracles or whether, sorry to say, he did not. Instead, the story presents us with one of humankind's most archetypal images – food. By telling this story once again, by enacting it in the eucharist, by singing elaborations of the image in our hymns, by praying the image in our petitions, we encourage one another to find our food in God and to share that food within and outside this community. Now: what does that mean, to find our food in the triune God? What are some examples of how we are to share that food with the hungry world? There's your sermon.

An example: fish

It is not only in the story of Christ's feeding of the multitude that we find fish. Indeed, if one were to analyze all the readings of the three-year lectionary, identifying their major images – which I did – and if one were then to tabulate the most-often recurring images – which I also did – one would discover that fish is one of the forty most recurring images in the three-year lectionary.

Let us look at how fish function in the gospels. At least four of the twelve disciples, Peter, Andrew, James and John, are said to have been fishermen who left their nets to follow Jesus. Were this detail merely an historical memory, we of course would wonder how their families then survived. However, the Bible's point is not socio-economic history. Indeed, when Luke tells this story, the call of Peter the fisherman is connected with the story of the miraculous draught of fishes, and John tells the story of the miraculous draught of fishes as an account of Christ's resurrection. So what are the gospel writers, who know their Hebrew Scriptures, meaning by fish? In Jeremiah's description of the return of the exiles, God promises that also the fishermen

will come back home, and in Ezekiel's dream of the new Jerusalem, the water flowing from the temple will be filled with fish "of a great many kinds," and people will fish from it with nets. So why fish?

What I discovered is that the literature and art of the ancient world presents many examples of sacred fish. For some coastal peoples, cosmogonic myths recognized the water as the source of all life and represented fish as closely connected to the divine. Some cultures were fascinated by the vast numbers of fish eggs and used the fish as a symbol of fecundity. Archeologists have

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found instances of fish functioning as symbols of both male or female genitals. From India to Mexico are examples of fish deities or divine mer-men and merwomen. Readers of the Bible may know that Dagon, the popular Philistine deity, was depicted as a merman and was understood to be the son of the sea goddess. Historians report that in Asia Minor during the times of the Roman

empire, there were widespread religious cults that included the sacrificing of fish. The apocryphal story of Tobit indicates just such a reverence for the powers of the fish. Guided by the angel Raphael's advice, Tobias is able to banish his fiancée's demons by burning the heart and the liver of a fish and to heal his father's blindness by applying on his eyes the fish's gall.

However, the fish was also demonized. Assyrian art, for example, contains many examples of the image of the sea monster, the primordial water creature that personified chaos and threatened destruction of the people. Students of the Old Testament know the Enuma Elish, the Babylonian creation story in which Marduk, the male warrior, conquered and destroyed Tiamat, the female sea monster, and in so doing tamed chaos for human civilization. The Tiamat monster is remembered in the Old Testament under the names Rahab and Leviathan. Rabbinic legends claim that the main course to be served at the messianic banquet at the end of time will be the Leviathan, the chaos monster finally conquered, cooked up, and served as food for the people. It is this same imagery that lies behind the contemporary practice of Jewish families serving gefilte fish at the annual seder meal.

It is not as if for the Israelites this sea monster was forever destroyed. The Bible includes several water stories that are most likely versions of the Tiamat myth. In the story of Noah's flood, God uses the chaotic seas to destroy the earth, and in the Exodus narrative of the crossing of the sea, the Egyptian army, drowned in the sea, functions as the historic instance of mythic evil. In the biblical versions of the myth, water is both the place of death and the way to new life. Noah is saved from the watery chaos, but the earth is born anew from the waters, repeating the creative miracle described in Genesis 1. In the exodus, the evil army, like Tiamat, is drowned in the sea, but the water becomes the people's pathway to freedom. The great fish both swallowed up but then granted rebirth to the prophet Jonah, and when Jesus cited this story, he used the belly of the fish as a symbol both of his coming death and of the birthplace of the resurrection. All this data suggested to me that the New Testament writers mean to connect fish with the messianic age. All the gospel accounts of the multiplication of loaves include fish as the food Christ serves on the mountain. In two resurrection appearances Jesus eats fish with the disciples. In John's account, Jesus even cooks the fish. It is hard to judge whether the tie between a fish meal and the life of Christ is based upon Old Testament allusions to fish at the endtime, Roman cults of sacred fish meals, or genuine historic memories connecting Jesus with fish suppers.

The early church made a great deal of the image of the fish. Fish figure significantly in catacomb art. One particularly striking room in the Roman catacomb of San Sebastiano displays in a series of pictures the entire story of Jonah and the fish. Several depictions of the eucharist show a fish on the paten. In one, Christ the Fish is shown on the anchor of the cross, with smaller fish, representing Christians, swimming nearby. One image of the Trinity is of three fish fanning out from a shared single head. Legend has it that a Syrian Christian realized that the Greek word for fish, *ichthys*, was also an acrostic for “Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Savior,” and so provided an extremely popular symbol for Christians that can be seen not only on ancient sarcophaguses but countless contemporary automobile bumper stickers.

Not only did baptismal fonts depict fish, but baptismal catechesis of early centuries utilized the imagery of fish. Often cited is Tertullian’s reference to Christians as “little fishes” and Christ our *ichthys*: “We, little fishes, after the example of our *ichthys* Jesus Christ, are born in water, nor have we safety in any other way than by permanently abiding in water.” Mystics played with the image of the fish. As Marguerite d’Oingt wrote in *The Mirror*, “The saints will be within their Creator just as the fish in the sea; they will drink all they want, without becoming tired and without lessening the amount of water. The saints will be just like this, for they will drink and eat the great sweetness of God.” Ecclesiastical iconography appropriated the symbol of the fisher for Peter.

For many contemporary worshipers, many if not all of these symbolic references are unknown. Nowadays fishing is either an increasingly precarious livelihood, due to reduced stocks and the government’s ecological regulations; or fishing is a pleasurable pastime, in which the necessity of securing one’s own food in the wild has turned into a relaxing activity devoid of any goal except itself. If the image of fish is to have much religious meaning for today’s church, some background in the ancient use of the fish image is required. However, when some time ago I related all this to a group of liturgists, one rather skeptical preacher called out, “Sometimes a fish is only a fish.” Yes, but I think in the layered imagery that we encounter in the liturgy, quite seldom. I suggest that when we find fish in Christian texts, we are to think “resurrection.”

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| Iēsous | = Jesus |
| CHristos | = Christ |
| THeou | = God’s |
| (h)Uios | = Son |
| Sōtēr | = Savior |

Another example: the city

Here we are in downtown Chicago: as Carl Sandburg wrote, the “Stormy, husky, brawling, City of the Big Shoulders, Laughing, Proud to be the Hog Butcher to the Nation” city of Chicago. Meeting here in Chicago suggested to me that we attend to the lectionary’s use of the image of the city, and what I discovered is that, similar to religious symbolism and literature from around the world, the Bible and our selections from it in the lectionary both praise the city as the apex of human civilization, yet also condemn it as a locus of all that is harmful.

Last summer on vacation I read a massive book about the origins of cities. Around the second millennium B.C.E., human communities in various places around the world began building cities. Usually these cities followed upon, and then accelerated further, significant technological advances in society. Food, goods, and services had increased beyond the subsistence level. In the city was ready storage of water. Communication within the city was aided by the development of an alphabet. In the city was division of labor, making daily work less onerous and offering wider individual options. A single religious ideology united the people, and a central government provided police power and administered communal justice.

In many ancient societies, the myths said the city came from the deities. For example, in

the Enuma Elish, after the divine hero had destroyed the chaos of the sea, he set up the city. The deity resided in a temple in the center of the city, thus insuring security for the people; the monarch was the vice-regent of the deity, authorized to rule the people. The city was a sacred place, and the physical arrangement of the city mirrored the divine world. The Bible is full of this myth. It underlies the language describing Jerusalem that we read in Psalms 2, 46, 48, 87, 89, 99, and 110, among others, and thus became foundational for Christian consideration of what is called “the city of God.” In the utopian Psalm 87, not only is the city the location of all springs of water, but even enemy peoples – Babylonians, Philistines – will some day be included as residents of God’s great city.

However, all these positive characteristics of urban life are judged differently if one lives outside the city. For rural peasants, the plentiful water available in the city was provided by an aqueduct system that drew water away from the farmers’ distant fields. Urban building projects required massive labor forces that were conscripted from farms. Many Old Testament stories depict the city, not as founded by God, but as opposed to all that is good. The city’s ethnic mix and the loss of traditional values threatened religious purity, as Solomon’s wives epitomize. The prophets condemned the injustices against the poor that were intensified by urban commerce. After all, the murderer Cain is remembered as having built the first city. Babel is remembered as a place of communal chaos, Sodom a haven for immorality, Pharaoh’s building projects the occasion for human slavery, Babylon a center of paganism, Nineveh a place of unbelief, and Rome as the archetypal military oppressor.

The lectionary demonstrates the same ambivalence toward the city that the entire Bible contains. Sometimes both images come to us on the same Sunday. On Pentecost, cycle c, we hear of both Babel, that symbol of human pride, and Jerusalem, a city that, like the mythic cities of old, is the place where the God’s Spirit dwells. Some readings from the prophets look forward with joy to the restoration of God’s city. Here the city is a picture of human peace and security that embodies the divine. Yet the lectionary includes as well condemnations of the city. Jesus wept over the unbelieving city of Jerusalem. In the Book of Revelation, although the city of Babylon figures as the image of all that is evil, it is the new Jerusalem which receives the lectionary’s attention. The Bible describes God’s final salvation is not, after all, as a garden, but as the city.

Still today, of course, cities are ambivalent places. They contain both state-of-the-art medical facilities and street corner drug sales, magnificent art museums and uncontrolled graffiti, fully-stocked department stores and abandoned slums. Yet although the lectionary provides us with both positive and negative references to the city, it is interesting how seldom the city has functioned in the church’s literature as an image of divine blessing. For example, try to locate hymn stanzas that thank God for the city, our actual contemporary city, as a place that improves human life. Our song traditions contain many hymns from especially the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century, which judged the cities of the early industrial revolution as centers of disease, dehumanization, poverty, and death. Although our hymns and church art do laud a heavenly city, a place beyond the real city, as an image for the divine, church language tends to praise the forest and the flower, rather than the library and the train line, as signs of God’s beneficence. A more biblical balance, however, would see that also the earthly city is filled with possibilities for human community and health for which God is praised. I would hope that preaching neither exonerates nor demonizes the city. As with all great symbolic images, “the city” contains both death and life.

Quickly, a third example: clothing

Let me say just a word or two about the image of clothing. I know a pastor who during the summertime presides at the liturgy in street clothes, rather than in an alb. I do not know whether he is aware of how his beer belly looks to the worshipers, but I do suspect that he is not as convinced as I am about the amazing symbolic imagery that the lectionary grants to clothing. Indeed, even apart from the liturgical significance of clothing, human societies have throughout time known that what we wear matters.

Here's a rapid survey of biblical dress. Adam and Eve, in coming into their adult consciousness, recognizing their sinfulness, understanding their sexuality, and fearing the otherness of the divine, get dressed. Thanks to God's mercy, they end up with better outfits than the ones they had sewed. Afterward we hear of Joseph's extraordinary coat; the bejeweled priestly vestments as authorized by God – breastplate, ephod, robe, tunic, turban, and sash, adorned with gold, blue, purple and crimson yarns, twelve gems, bells and gold filigree; the people of Nineveh donning sackcloth; a new robe for the prodigal son; the Jewish ritual fringes of Jesus' attire; the dazzling white of his transfiguration, the

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purple robe after the trial, to the perhaps total nakedness of the crucifixion. In the lectionary, clothing functions not only as literal dress, but also as metaphor. The prophet describes the coming of the Spirit of God as if one is donning a garland and putting on a mantle. God has clothed the poet with garments of salvation and a robe of righteousness, clothing as stunning as the jewels that adorn a bride for her wedding. The epistles connect the image of clothing with baptism. Our old self has been stripped away and we are clothed newly with the image of God. Finally there is the stunning passage from the Book of Revelation in which all the baptized stand in white robes around the heavenly throne, robes made white by being washed in blood. The classic white baptismal gown is of course supposed to recall these white robes, our alb also the white robe of the baptized.

Don't forget Julian. In fourteenth century Norwich, England, there lived a remarkable woman whom we know only as Julian, which was the name of the church next to which she lived as a hermit. She experienced a series of visions from God, the most often-cited being that of the Trinity as her father, her mother, and her spouse. She also wrote of Christ having taken on our human tunic, "tight, bare and short," and our having received, in a merciful exchange, the cloak of Christ, that wraps us round. She wrote, "Our good Lord is our clothing that, for love, wraps us up and winds us about, embracing us, all beclosing us and hanging about us, for tender love." Yet Julian, who always surprises us with her positive delight in God's mercy, moves one step more with her image of clothing. Not only do we enjoy wearing Christ, but we are Christ's crown: that is, Christ is wearing us. Not only are we wrapped round with the cloak of Christ, but Christ is arrayed with us.

So in the lectionary, check to see whether any mention of clothing is open to all these clothes, the fig leaves and the priestly vestment, Joseph's coat and the white robes of the martyrs, the entire biblical closet open before us. And how about putting on that alb?

In conclusion

Preaching with images is nothing new in the history of the church. One of the masters at such preaching was Ambrose, and we can read some of his sermons in any theological library. One of Ambrose's techniques which is particularly instructive for our contemporary search for images of God is that each image was at the close of the sermon brought to the Trinity. So Ambrose proclaimed that God is light, the fire in the burning bush; Christ is the tree which gives shade to the world; the Holy Spirit is a river that flows forever and never grows less. And I am fascinated to read Augustine record in his *Confessions* that finally what made him take Christianity seriously was Ambrose's preaching.

Go for the images. Read them in the Bible, find them in the lectionary, look for them in museums, hunt them down in the sermons of the church fathers, the reveries of the mystic mothers and the literature of our age, sing them in hymns old and new, reproduce them from clip art books, sew them onto banners (no words necessary), write them on the doorposts of your house, ingrain them in your heart. For if I am right, these images still have the power to convey to us life from God.