

AUSTIN PRESBYTERIAN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

# COMMUNITAS



*Publication of the College of Pastoral Leaders*



Volume 7

2010

THE ART OF PREACHING

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**COMMUNITAS** is a term anthropologist Victor Turner uses to describe the temporary but intense community that develops among pilgrims for the duration of the journey (remember the pilgrims of the Canterbury Tales). For us in the church, it might describe the community we develop with the successive churches we serve, or the community of cohorts of the College of Pastoral Leaders, gathering to study together for a brief period of years.

Turner also employs the concept of liminality to describe that pilgrim experience of leaving the domain of the familiar to travel and to experience new potentialities and powers that lie afield. We leave home, travel light, expose ourselves both to the unknowns in the world of the horizon and the unknowns within our own souls, now freed to be heard in the silence of the road. Again, the cohorts of the College of Pastoral Leaders leave the parish momentarily to hear the experiences of colleagues and to contemplate the ministries seeking to emerge from their own souls. So we are pilgrims in the College, our experience shaped by *communitas* and liminalities.

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INTRODUCTION

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Is it just me, or do I sense out in the land a new malaise around the craft and discipline of preaching? Does it have to do with the “crazybusyness” that Professor Cynthia Rigby reflects upon, where we have so heavily scheduled ourselves that we allow no time for the generative process from which is birthed good preaching? Does it have to do with the temptations of “multi-tasking” which Professor Jennifer Lord notices—the computers, phones, PDA devices, etc. that behave, often, as enemies of the imagination? Does it have to do with a contemporary suspicion of words, of the Word? I don’t know.

What I do know is that I have been inspired by this issue of *Communitas* to think anew, and to think differently, about preaching. Jen Lord has given me something new to think about with respect to the process out of which good preaching springs—the creative play between “top down” and “bottom up” modes of homiletical and imaginative attention. And speaking of creative play, Cindy Rigby lifts up for our reconsideration the utter necessity of seeing the work of preaching as play.

Within this issue is a series of reflections on the preaching task from various cohort members within our College of Pastoral Leaders. Kathryn Barlow-Williams encourages us to take the upcoming Sunday text(s) with us through the week, as a kind of companion, even if we catch ourselves scribbling down new thoughts during the Hymn Before the Sermon, until the Spirit breathes new and urgent life into our pulpit witness. Beverly Sonnier reminds us that preaching is dangerous because we aren’t altogether in control of its power. Daniel G. Conklin recalls how preaching holds together a creative tension between the Bible and the world—a tension that forever throws off wisdom to which we must pay attention. Laura Holck, on Monday, begins walking next Sunday’s sermon into being, and isn’t finished with it—I mean this literally!—until right before that sermon is delivered.

Torey Lightcap shares his ongoing pilgrimage in which he is steadily letting go of himself in preaching, in order to welcome in the Spirit. Bob Rice explores the discipline of seeing—that which we see and not that which we know, that which is not yet seen

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but is meant to be, and that experience of having been seen—as necessary to effective preaching. Dayna Kinkade ends these various reflections with the appropriate observation that the art of preaching is an offering.

We end this issue with a reading list suggested by various of our faculty. Such reading, after all, feeds the imagination and is often playful; and will surely find its way into your preaching from time to time.

Read on, and then preach with power and authority!

Theodore J. Wardlaw

*President, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary*

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For more Cohort Reflection essays and information about  
the College of Pastoral Leaders at  
Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary,  
and to read back issues of *Communitas*,  
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# PREACHING NOW: PAYING ATTENTION IN A GADGET WORLD

JENNIFER L. LORD

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## IMAGINATION AS BIBLICAL INHERITANCE

**T**he small boy turned and trotted back to the woman tucking her silver hair into her swim cap. “Tell me a story again,” he demanded. We were at the local downtown swimming hole, that natural outdoor pool that many of us won’t give up even when the days dip to our 40-degree version of winter. I thought I had stumbled upon a grandma/grandson conversation but instead it proved happenstance between strangers. “Look for the monkey feathers and while I’m swimming I’ll fling the faeries out of the pool to you,” was her response. Though the little one wanted to hear more about those monkeys and faeries, the lifeguard and I agreed that we were interested in the chocolate cake that somehow figured into the tale.

Then I heard this from the mouth of the babe: “Is it real?” He was questioning the veracity of sparkling water being faeries’ footprints. The swimmer explained to him that there are different types of real—the have-to-do stuff of life that is real and the “imagination part of the brain” that makes stories and is a real but different way of seeing things.

Preachers know about this “imagination part of the brain.” We’ve long told stories. Miraculous stories, scientifically challenged stories, unbelievable stories: the biblical stories. We set out the images: garden and apple, flooding waters, mountain and tablets, plumb lines, a manger, a mustard seed, a shepherd, wheat and tares, another garden, a hillside and a cross, another garden with an empty tomb, a room on fire, a bejeweled city. And we gather weekly around the images: water, bread, wine, people. Our biblical (and hence liturgical) language is full of stories, metaphors, analogies, and images. But

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*The Reverend Dr. Jennifer L. Lord teaches preaching at Austin Seminary and has recently been named to the Dorothy B. Vickery Chair in Homiletics. Her book Finding Language and Imagery: Words for Holy Speech (Fortress Press, Elements of Preaching Series) was published in 2009. She is working on several book projects, including one on preaching from the Revised Common Lectionary, while also serving on the boards of the North American Academy of Liturgy and the Academy of Homiletics.*

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the difference is that we who share in these things again and again do not name them pretend, rather they name and bear the good news of God and, by their imagistic and narrative power, say both that which is promised (into which we lean and act in hope) and that which has everything to do with the stuff of life now. In other words, we do well to see that the *who* and *how* of the triune God are carried by such word-symbols and narratives. Tell us another story indeed.

Years ago homiletician Edmund Steimle succinctly claimed this: for preaching to be biblical it must be dialogical. Preaching, he said, is biblical in that it follows the conversational pattern of the scriptural canon: preaching continues God's ongoing dialogue with God's people.<sup>1</sup> These days homiletical materials always speak to the need for preaching to be contextual and this is Steimle's way of saying this same thing. Preaching is not about abstract dogmatic discourse or listing free-floating truths of life. Preaching, as a means of Christ's presence, is speech that connects texts and theological focus and the news of God's mercy to the needs of humanity and the world now. In this way preaching is contextual because it continues to manifest God with us. In this essay I suggest that an aspect of preaching's dialogical nature is its storied and imagistic forms and, in order for this to be accomplished, preachers must incorporate time for creative processes as part of their sermon preparation work. This is therefore to say two things: first, that preaching has storied and imagistic forms (through its very language) and, second, that preachers take a cue from the metaphorical nature of the biblical text and work to tell the "truth slant." Preaching that is dialogical understands that such imaginative work is a vehicle of communication.

Following Steimle's lead, then, preaching is biblical in that it does what the texts do: speaks the good news of God to particular peoples and situations. I think most preachers try to do this work.<sup>2</sup> But here I nuance this claim to say that a further way that preaching is dialogical is that it takes the nature of human communication seriously: we are a metaphorical, storied species. Some would say that we swim in metaphors all the daylong and we never towel off. For instance if we move a table we watch where we set the legs. We reposition the arm of the desk lamp. These objects don't really have arms and legs, we use the wrong word that creates an image in our minds and conveys something we affirm about the object. Metaphors (and images, stories, analogies) permeate our speech. They are the way we communicate. Neurologist Alice Flaherty studies the biology of creativity and comments pointedly on the human proclivity to narrative and imagery:

I might say more accurately that metaphors are useful, perhaps even necessary, to unite the cognitive and emotional meaning of a proposition. The way the two are integrated has everything to do with the way our brains work. Metaphor's resonance comes from its ability to activate not only the cerebral cortex's cognitive and sensory networks, but also the limbic system's affective and motivational networks. That both networks are necessary for what we would call understanding, in science and in literature and in life, is clear from instances in which only one is engaged ... As we all know from trying to memorize facts in school, the more senses that are involved, the more fully the memory is encoded.<sup>3</sup>

## PREACHING WORDS AND TIME

All of this applies to preaching. Homiletical categories keep a distinction between abstract, conceptual language and evocative language. We need both, but preachers need to show what the abstract concepts look like in our lives. For example we do and should pray for God's mercy, and sermons give us images and narratives about the concept of mercy as it connects to our lives. We announce and claim God's forgiveness and preaching shows what this looks like.<sup>4</sup> The language of stories and images evokes memories, feelings, and life experiences. It moves beyond informational detail and abstractions. It takes work each week to name the concepts and then to name the ways they are alive and operative in and through us.

And this takes commitment. I'm on a campaign these days to help preachers grab a hold of their homiletical birthright: we are ones entrusted with words. With a charge to come up with the right words. Timely words. We are the ones, through our ordinations and commissionings, given stewardship of God's transforming words. We are called to set out the words that wash us again in baptismal truths. Words that feed us like the bread and the cup. It does matter that we work for the right words. What we say and how we say what we say does matter for the assembly encountering the meaning of God.<sup>5</sup> It is not enough to cut and paste a sermon. In this day of endless words we must pick our way through the scree to find the right words. And yes, this takes time.

Here's the other part of my campaign fervency: I want preachers to grab a hold of their calendars (whatever form their calendar takes these days) and make room for preaching preparation time. I'm not alone in this invitation. There are several recent homiletic publications that focus on exactly this call. And, they help us think through what preaching preparation time looks like these days. Hint: it no longer looks like (or: it never was supposed to look like!) twenty hours a week sitting at a desk with one's books. A revised schedule for preaching preparation probably does not mean clearing space for more preparation hours (though it may mean this for some pastors). Instead it most likely means reconfiguring *how* you spend that time. Good preaching takes time, research time. But it also takes soak time. Percolation time. Time for the yeast to work. Time for the preacher to explore tangents, wander down different trails, turn new corners of exploration. So those preparation hours are both the ones spent on focused research, study, exegetical investigation and are the hours for simply holding onto a text or textual idea and passing it "through the fire of life."

Recent preaching books are full of insights about preaching preparation time and come by way of preachers reflecting on their art, homileticians recounting their visits with creative writers, and neuroscientists telling us new things about how our brains light up. These recent homiletical insights free preachers to count and even plan for the work of imagination, association, and exploration as we hold the texts up to the week's local and global events and to the particularities of the congregation, all in an effort to speak the mercy of God in a given place on that given day.

PAYING ATTENTION: TWO MODES

One of these newer publications talks in general about the writing process. It wasn't even a year ago when a friend of mine called my attention to a brief article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. It was titled: "Attention, Please! Your Book is Calling!"<sup>7</sup> And it reminded readers of the obvious: if you have a big project (like a book) you have to, at some point, set aside the small projects and begin chipping away at the big project. No surprise. There are times when we simply cannot multitask. We must set aside multitasking to write a sermon. We must set aside other tasks to pray. We must set aside all things to sit and listen to a patient during a hospital visit. There are times—yes!—to turn off texting and ringers and our monkey mind (as the Buddhists call it). There is a season to cease multitasking—Qoheleth in Ecclesiastes surely meant to say—a season to cease and focus on one thing. This article made a persuasive case. The author then cited Winifred Gallagher's recent exploration of the psychology of these things in Gallagher's book *Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life*.<sup>8</sup> Gallagher says that even when we are "in the zone"—when we are focused on, for instance, our sermon or a prayer or the person sitting across from us in the pastoral visitation, even when we are in the zone we are still managing different types of attention.

Sometimes we consciously direct our attention, shining a tractor beam of thought exactly where we want it to go. That "top down" focus, driven by will, feels very different from the second mode of attention, which is more passive and expansive. Rather than a precisely aimed beam, this second type of attention wanders over the terrain, illuminating whatever seems most salient or unusual. Instead of being driven to find a particular thing, this type of focus, which Gallagher dubs the "bottom up" attention, simply notices what is there, registering all its aspects.

Gallagher then goes on to say that writing—which is the primary focus of the article—is a creative activity like all others in that it requires some switching between the *top down* and *bottom up* channels of attention.

I think that pastors spend a lot of time working in the *top down* mode. And part of that is not by choice—it is the technology upon you. Can you even remember the former days? Pre-email? Pre-Facebook? Pre-texting? You are so accessible—in demand—you get more messages and requests than ever before. Because of this you are asked to make more decisions and make them quickly. I think that preachers, these days, frequently live according to the *top down* mode of attention.

I'm convinced that good preaching needs both types of attention—*top down* and *bottom up*. Most of the time, because of the demands on our hours, we fit in the *top down* time so that we can a)come up with an idea and b)string a few things together to say about that idea. It is my observation that, for many preachers, the invitation to a renewed preaching preparation practice is an invitation to *bottom up* attention. Remember, this is the mode of attention that is about being expansive, having insights, making space for associations and connections. Informed by preachers and creative writers and neuroscientists it takes on many forms but can look like this:

Find a place to read the texts. Read aloud. List your immediate associations with

the text (anything that comes to mind). Read in a place that is counter-intuitive to reading scripture (a bench at city hall, a seat in a mall, a waiting room at a bus station or emergency care center). Engage sensory exegesis: if it is a narrative text, block the text's movement, or block the back-story to the non-narrative text, see the sights, smell the smells, retell the story using senses not mentioned in the text. List your questions about the texts.

This initial work raises questions for further detective work with the texts. It may be at this point that preachers research the text's historical setting, genre, place in the cannon, in the book, engage word studies and any translation or comparative translation work, investigate images, imagine the author's intentions, think through political-economic contexts surrounding the text. This work is a mix of *top down* and *bottom up* work. *Bottom up* engages the biblical and commentary material in order to ask more questions and observe (and record) associations (this idea makes me think of this ...). *Top down* work happens when the preacher tries to pin down answers to or decisions about these questions.

I actually see all the above activities as being an afternoon-worth of work. It makes sense to me to block out a morning or an afternoon to do this initial work, which, as mentioned, is a mix of *bottom up* and *top down* work. But then comes the important next step. This is the step that is missed when preachers begin the above work too late in the week for Sunday preaching. The next step is when you keep the texts available to you and keep at hand some sort of means of keeping notes. The next step is to live with the text and your discoveries thus far and carry it around in you as you go about your life. This next step is truly *bottom up* type work.

This is the time for carrying the texts around in your bodily self. The texts go to hospital visits and youth group member lacrosse games. The texts pick up dinner and do laundry. The texts select hymns and write bulletin announcements. The texts plan church council agendas and stewardship campaigns. This is *bottom up* activity, going about our daily work and bearing the texts within us to bring forth connections, questions, associations, stories, images, examples, the stuff of life. This *bottom up* activity is necessary to help us focus the word of life from the text for our context on that given Sunday.<sup>9</sup>

## TECHNOLOGY AND MODES OF ATTENTION

Here's where this call to renewal of preaching preparation time gets personal. In order for these two modes of attention to work well, they, in a word, deserve attention. There is no way around this but to say there comes a time when we must put down our gadgets. By this I mean, yes, computers, phones, PDA devices, whatever electronic gadgets hold the current lifeline status for our being.

Let me be clear: there comes a time to put these devices down. But there is a time for their use: used well they help us research the top down focus we need for a sermon. And used well these devices enable us to wander the tides of information, gathering bits of this and that in a *bottom up* associative mode of attention. Used well, these devices help our work. But we are using them in an unchecked, they-control-us way. It is not

off the mark to say they are like an addiction and take control of us. This addictive power has surfaced every time when, during the past five years, I have sent preaching conference participants out for a “day off”: a day outside (because creative writers have long known fresh air is the best for clearing the mind) with only a pad of paper and pen or pencil (because non-screen activities make us work differently). There is a serious readjustment period. And, inevitably, a flow of creativity.

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Matt Richtel, a technology reporter for the *New York Times*, draws a comparison between food and technology: “Some technology is Twinkies, and some technology is Brussel sprouts. And we know that if we overeat it causes problems.”<sup>10</sup> His recent research focuses on scientific studies about the effect of technological devices on our brains, specifically on our increased consumption of information, the “screen invasion” in our lives, and patterns of attention and addiction in relation to gadgets. I think his findings are eminently applicable to preachers and the preaching preparation process.

For instance, Richtel cites human studies that show a release of cortisol (a stress hormone) when technology—like email—interrupts us. And that this contributes to reduced retention: this impacts our memory. And, this neurological evidence is supplemented by behavioral studies that document insights like human difficulty with filtering and focus when immersed in multimedia multitasking. Instead these studies indicate that the human brain focuses better on one stream of information, not on multiple streams. Add to all of this the more recent (two decades now) scientific approach that understands the human brain to be plastic rather than fixed: our brain selves are still forming well into adulthood. In other words we choose how to use our devices and so chose to pattern our brains with nutrient-poor or nutrient-rich activities.

I include these observations by Richtel to urge preachers to pay attention to their habits and how gadget habits affect attention. They do. We have given ourselves over to their “intermittent reinforcement” when, out of a nanosecond of boredom we check our in-box. We hope for a good surprise and feel a compulsion to check in constantly. We cease paying attention to what is (who is) right in front of us, seduced instead by the screen. Maybe you recognize it: that inability to focus on intriguing details of a text because your mind is over-full. Maybe you recognize it: an inability to feel comfortable with silence and empty hands. Maybe you recognize it: more facility with grab and go than with generative insights and questions.

Per Gallagher’s findings, writers (I insert here preachers as writers for public speech) need focus for the *top down* work of preaching. I have emphasized that it is good to do that work toward the beginning of the week so that you can live with the texts. But writers/preachers also need space for *bottom up* work. That might be the best word these days: space. Richtel’s reports call us out: we fill our space with our gadgets and those gadgets are patterning us in behaviors that affect memory, creativity, and the ability to be present in the moment to human need and the world in which we live. We are filling our brain space, our life space, and it is taking a toll on imagination.

I invite preachers to retraining—the altering of a rhythm. I invite preachers to intentionally retrain any hyped-up, frenzied off-rhythms that have taken life-space. Take stock of what you are doing. Disrupt it for a few hours or, better, for an entire day

each week (not your day off but a “day off” gadgets). Keep up with your short-term and long-term word work. With these directives I’m calling for a slow preaching movement akin to the slow food movement; slow preaching preparation to retrain ourselves to pay attention and find connections between the day’s texts and the world in front of you as embodied in the gathered people. Good preaching needs the texts and the people and theological precision and a pastor’s heart—and this takes time, *top down* and *bottom up* time. It takes, I am convinced, time with the texts and then just you and your imagination and the freshest outdoor air you can find. Because the sermon, as a speeched form of God with us, is meant to shine forth.<sup>11</sup> ❏

## NOTES

1. See Edmund A. Steimle, and Morris J. Neidenthal, and Charles L. Rice, *Preaching the Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1990).

2. I do worry about the ease with which some preachers hunt through websites, cutting and pasting from sermon supply sites or other’s sermons. These are the sermons that inevitably sound disconnected from the context, clichéd, and tiresome.

3. Alice W. Flaherty, *The Midnight Disease: The Drive to Write, Writer’s Block, and the Creative Brain*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 230.

4. See Jennifer L. Lord, *Finding Language and Imagery: Words for Holy Speech* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 29-52.

5. Now certainly we can and should have lengthy discussions about whether or not preachers, being human, have absolute power to say the right thing at the right time. We can have discussions about what is in our realm of control. We should talk about the work of God both in and through and even, if we are honest, in spite of what we do. I am happy for us to continue these discussions. For this essay I want to shine a beam of light on this one aspect of our preaching work: finding the words to say things well does matter. For a careful review of theologies of proclamation see James F. Kay, *Preaching and Theology* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2007).

6. See, for instance, Linda Clader, *Voicing the Vision* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Morehouse: 2004); Jana Childers, ed., *Birthing the Sermon* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice: 2001); Lord, *Finding Language and Imagery*; Alyce McKenzie, *Novel Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

7. Amy Benson Brown, “Help, Your Book is Calling” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 5, 2010.

8. Winifred Gallagher, *Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009).

9. This is weekly work but also long-term work. For a description of practices see Lord, 50-52.

10. <http://www.npr.org/tmemplates/transcript.php?storyId=129384107>, accessed October 11, 2010.

11. See Gerard Manely Hopkins’ poem “God’s Grandeur.”

# PREACHING AS AN ART OF PLAYING

CYNTHIA L. RIGBY

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*Beautiful playing presupposes an intuitive, childlike awareness of the essence or center ... of all things. It is from this center, from this beginning and end, that I hear Mozart create his music.*

—Karl Barth, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*

Many of us know we are called to proclaim the Word of God because we have, at one time or another, had the experience Karl Barth describes in the above quote. That is: we have preached with an “an intuitive, childlike awareness of ... the center ... of all things.” And so we have had the experience of being perfectly free, of knowing we are creatures who belong to the Creator God in life and in death, of resting so securely in our identity that we have become the creative agents God intends us to be—the experience of purely, transparently, joyfully, and beautifully proclaiming the majesty of God.

But we have not had this experience often enough. If our first love for Christ, having dwindled, is ever in search of renewal, our preaching can only gesture toward that which lays claim to us, ever-yearning for conscious participation. “I shall again praise God,”<sup>1</sup> is, after all, sometimes the best we can do. If we can keep hope alive, in this war-ridden, terrorist-stricken, globally warming, Blackberry-pressing context in which we live, we have done well (we tell ourselves). If we can just keep the center in sight, directing our parishioners toward it, we will have been good pastors (we try to convince ourselves).

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Except that proclamation is not about giving directions. It is not about exhorting people to be oriented toward the center, but to live out of it. And it must be done by those of us who have “been there” or, at least, have some recollection of “having been there.” It is only from the context of the center that we, as preachers, may bear witness to the truth of the Gospel, to the transforming power of the Word of God. It is only from the context of the center that we can talk about God and God’s work, rather than about ourselves and our work.

So—why isn’t preaching more often characterized by the freedom, joy, and beauty we associate with its proper identity? Why is it so difficult to preach from the “center”? Why is it so hard to stay in touch with this center that we know is the source of all life, the originator of our very words?

One reason why we do not preach freely, joyfully, and beautifully is because we have forgotten that our work, as preachers, is play. It is play in the sense that it follows from and bears witness to God’s grace-full action on our behalf. It is play because it neither accomplishes, nor itself contributes to, the salvation of ourselves or our hearers. And it is play because God has ordained that preachers who can contribute nothing are at the same time integrally involved in the creative, salvific work that is all God’s and—as it turns out—also ours.

Preaching as an art of playing faithfully mimes and mimics God’s actions even as children rehearse the life of their parents’ world. I watch my three-year-old son, Alexander, pretend to fry an egg and serve it to his one-year-old sister, Jessica. He serves it from the center of what he knows to be true. He is an egg-receiver who reaches out of his participation in what is real to include his sister. His play creates a space for her. The eggs, the frying pan, and the burner are made of wood—he is a child incapable of breaking and frying real eggs in a real pan—but the play in which he engages invites her into the reality of the center in which he, the child, stands.

I hear that kids are forgetting how to play. We have so over programmed them, with sports and classes and development centers and computer games, that they don’t know what to do with an unstructured hour. One of my friends went to her second-grade daughter’s “parent-teacher’s nite” and was shown a bulletin board on which the kids had posted their New Year’s resolutions. My friend was shocked by one child’s resolution, written in the scrawling hand of an overextended seven-year-old: “to spend more time with my family.” A seven-year old has to work at spending more time with her family? How much space, my friend wondered, does this child have to explore and discover the world?

It seems clear to me that we are robbing our children of their time to imagine, their time to play, their time to create a world consistent with the center in which, at best, they stand. This isn’t really surprising, I suppose, since the world our children inhabit is the same world in which we ourselves live. A world in which everyone unrepentantly describes themselves as “stressed,” or “tense,” or “tired.” A world in which everyone, it seems, is “crazybusy.” And preachers, perhaps, are among the crazybusiest.<sup>2</sup>

The thing is, to be “crazybusy” is a sin.<sup>3</sup> It is keeping us from playing—from participating in, and inviting others into, the center. It is symptomatic of the fact that we have forgotten we are children living in a world that is beyond our comprehension, the

world that is our true home, the Kingdom of God.

Taking ourselves too seriously means we are not taking God seriously enough.<sup>4</sup> Preaching from the center, as those committed to understanding this task as an art of playing, requires a “fundamental rediscovery.”<sup>5</sup> It requires returning, again and again, to the truth that our work, as preachers, is creaturely work that is at once both not the work of God and integral to the divine work. It is only as such that it is free, and joyous, and beautiful. It is to be engaged in with the great fervor and seriousness of children who serve up their wooden eggs with the confidence of those who have been served, with the confidence of those who are at this very moment eating at the table, with the confidence of those who will inevitably be served again. It is to live and work with the conviction that our wooden eggs and frying pans, our words and our pulpits—finite, creaturely, limited playthings that they are—make a real contribution to the one work of God by way of the Creator become creature. In and through our Lord Jesus Christ, our preaching as play is a holy thing used by the Spirit to bear God to the world. In and through our brother Christ, we children are brought into the life of God as creative agents whose imaginative work expedites the coming of the Kingdom to earth, as it is in heaven.

Let us position ourselves for a fundamental rediscovery, renewing our commitment to preaching out of the center. Let us repent of forgetting that we are children, creative creatures held by our Creator God. Let us consider, together, how we might make time, in our crazybusy preacher’s lives, for play. Let us insist on knowing, again, what it is to preach freely, and joyously, and beautifully. ❖

## NOTES

1. See Psalm 42, Revised Standard Version.
2. This word is the title of Edward M. Hallowell’s book, *CrazyBusy* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006).
3. For more on this, see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/4* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 552 ff.
4. Barth, *CD III/4*, 553.
5. Paul Lehmann, *Forgiveness: A Decisive Issue in Protestant Thought* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1941), 4-5.

# The Blank Page

KATHERYN BARLOW-WILLIAMS

**A**s I made my way to the pulpit to deliver my first sermon, I felt sure that God would strike me down on the spot. Raised as a Southern Baptist, I had been taught that female preachers were the spawn of Satan. Fortunately, the Presbyterian church where I did my seminary internship held a different view. I found myself assigned the difficult tasks of proclaiming God's word and silencing the Baptist within me in one fell swoop. My heart thundered in my chest as I fought against a powerful urge to throw up. Though completely new to this experience, I did understand that the act of regurgitation would not proclaim the hope of the gospel. Then, quite miraculously and unexpectedly, instead of either being struck down or throwing up in the pulpit, I was lifted up, freed, and made fully alive. The connection I felt to God and to the people in the congregation was exhilarating. At that moment, I loved to preach.

I loved to preach until I had to do it again. I did not know as a young student that this would become the rhythm of my life and ministry for twenty years. My soul would be wrung with dread, fear, and love each week until a sermon was born, and then I could nap. Preaching, as it turns out, is both exhilarating and exhausting.

When faced with the ominous blank page, waiting for the scripture and commentaries to weave themselves into a sermon, I am overwhelmed. I hate preaching then. Here are the thoughts that fire through my mind in rapid succession:

It's too hard.

I have nothing to say.

I don't even know if I believe it.

I am mad at God today.

Why would someone want to listen to me?

I would rather watch Oprah.

No one knows how hard this is.

I could make just as much money working at Nordstrom selling shoes.

I hate to preach.

I would rather clean my closet.

In fact, I must clean my closet ... right now!

I must fold the laundry. And unload the dishwasher.

I hate cleaning, but I hate preaching more. I'll clean.

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To this day, I am practically defeated by the power of a blank page. I have to force myself to settle down and work by faith, not by fear. I use strategies like these to keep myself grounded:

First things first.

Stop worrying about the results.

Just enjoy some quiet time with God.

Let the Word speak to you; don't force it.

Be grateful, not grumpy.

Open yourself to the wonder of the spirit.

Shut up and get over yourself.

I read, reflect, and pray about the scripture passage. In that space, I am at peace. Then I clean. Sometimes I walk the dogs. While I walk or clean, the words of scripture and commentary sift through my mind and trickle into my soul. I pray that God will transform my thoughts into a sermon. Sometimes God does, and it is glorious; sometimes God doesn't, and it is not glorious. Up and down, love and hate, the cycle twists and wrings my mind through the week.

I have known—and even been friends with—those preachers who finish their sermons by Thursday so they can enjoy the weekend. I am not one of them. Even when my sermon seems to be written by Thursday, I don't stop working on it until I stand in the pulpit. People in my congregation have seen me scribble notes during the hymns and anthems and ask if I am writing the sermon during worship. Best not to tell them the truth; sometimes, I am.

Here's the mystery. In those freakish weeks when my sermon is "done" by Thursday—research completed, thoughts organized, illustrations at the ready—somehow it falls flat. I tend not to feel connected to either God or the congregation as I preach it. In these weeks, the sermon is missing the Spirit: the Spirit that breathes through our brokenness—mine and the listeners'; that comes from heaven to touch our earthly chaos; that heals, connects, and makes us whole; that exhilarates and exhausts us and ultimately draws us to God. That Spirit is neither constrained nor unleashed by a well-written or poorly written sermon.

During those particularly insane weeks when my children are sick, my husband is on a business trip, the car breaks down, three people in the church need emergency surgery, and then dopey dog pulls the casserole dish off the kitchen counter and eats shards of broken glass, there isn't time to write a sermon that makes your preaching professor proud. Those are the moments I surrender to God and say, "You preach. I'm too busy." With nothing but a few notes scribbled on a piece of notebook paper, I face the pulpit. And I lean heavily upon the wise words of a dear friend: "Walk the lame dog proudly."

Here's the second mystery. The sermons scribbled out on notebook paper with coffee stains are the sermons that draw people in. When they ask me for a copy of it, I shrug my shoulders and hide the tattered paper in my pocket. I can offer them an audio copy, but it won't be the same. God was in the moment. Often, in these sermons, I feel most alive in the pulpit—in the moments when I know that God is surely with me

## COHORT REFLECTIONS

because I could never have pulled off such a thing on my own. Granted, my well-prepared sermons are not always flat, and my spontaneous sermons don't always soar. I have learned over the years, though, that there is no direct correlation. A great sermon is a gift from God, regardless of how much or how little time I work on it.

In fact, some of my best sermons happen because I was trying to live the gospel for others. A great sermon doesn't begin with commentaries and a three-point outline; it begins with how we live each day. When we spend our days trying to make connections through Christ's love, the words we speak on Sunday have power and Spirit.

Oddly, when I don't have to preach, I feel, not an overwhelming sense of relief, but empty and lost. I am out of the rhythm of my life—the rhythm that pulls me toward God's love: dread, fear, clean, read, reflect, clean, pray, clean, clean, walk, write, preach, nap. Exhilaration, Exhaustion. Life, Death, Resurrection. Love. This is the cycle of the Spirit at work in my life as a preacher. Even though it pays about the same as selling shoes at Nordstrom's, the gift of preaching is literally priceless. ❖

## And I Shall Preach

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BEVERLY SONNIER

“And the disciples went everywhere preaching, the Master working right with them, validating the Message with indisputable evidence.”

(Mark 16:20, *The Message*)

**A**s I've often heard in the Baptist church, “Now, that will preach!” This brief scripture text reveals four basic truths: 1) Those who preach must be zealous; 2) they must preach in tandem with God; 3) their message will be validated; and (4) God's Word is sure!

I had to learn to preach. Some eighteen years later, my preaching continues to be a work in progress as I hone my preaching skills, developing a homiletic of my own. I had to find my own authentic voice early on. I learned most of what I know about preaching from my early seminary encounters with Dean of the Chapel Emeritus Evans Crawford, Howard University School of Divinity in Washington, DC, who had me prayerfully re-examine my declarative statement that I was certain God had called me to *teach* His Word, not *preach* it; from my seminary support group of pastors, Loretta Johnson, Anita Gould, and Denise Mason; and from seasoned pastor/preachers Rev. Dr. Jacqueline Donald-Mims and Rev. Dr. Valerie Bridgeman-Davis, both of Austin, Texas, who have offered candid reflections and guidance in my preaching development. Echoes of these and other voices can be heard in my sermons.

Reflecting on my creative process for writing and preaching, I concur with a host of ministers who affirm the process does not always fit “neatly” in a certain block of time; being in “multi-tasking mode” is my “life reality,” and rarely do I just sit down—block out everything around me (as well as the plethora of thoughts swimming through my head)—and focus, study, and commence to write! I do, however, subscribe to the notion that proper preparation of mind, body, and spirit are essential in the process. Incorporating an active prayer life, true worship, consistent Bible study, truthful confession of sin, and adequate sleep throughout the entire process helps center me. Stop. Pray. Pay attention. Listen. (Don't listen with your ears, Beverly; listen with your heart! What are you feeling?) I then pray this short prayer taken from *Showing Mary*, by Rev. Dr. Renita Weems:

Oh Lord, even though I cannot see my way, still I hear your voice calling me in the whirlwind. Things are falling apart and coming together at the same

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time. Fear and calm overtake me. Feelings of unworthiness and divine boldness vacillate within. But I hear You beckoning me, telling me to get up, reach out, look up, and step out. I hear and obey!<sup>1</sup>

All of these conditions help open doors and windows to the artistry, creativity, and imagery of my sermon writing and preaching process as I seek inspiration, ask thought-provoking questions, and arouse curiosity with stories, anecdotes, and expressive words. I live for the invitation from God to meet God anew and to discover new dimensions of how God wants to use me and to reveal to me how and what I am capable of preaching as ideas are birthed.

I enter the process of writing and preaching knowing that as preacher I must have a clear message when I stand to preach, that the message does not have to be lengthy, and that Christ must be the central theme of my preaching. I also enter the process anticipating an ultimate outcome of transformation in the hearers' giving, attitude, and living.

Life experiences help me find my focus in writing and preaching. Everything we in ministry experience in life can be divinely designed to stretch and grow us emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually. When we recognize how much we need God in our preaching and when we are attentive to how the Holy Spirit speaks to and through us, we are strengthened and guided through the process.

Is my preaching profitable to others? And above all, do my words glorify God? I'm reminded of a phrase I heard years ago: If your mind goes blank during preaching, don't forget to turn off the sound! Effective preaching occurs not only when we know what we want to say, but also when we know the persons to whom we are preaching. Linda L. Clader, in *Voicing the Vision: Imagination and Prophetic Preaching*, describes this communal and dialogical aspect of the writing and preaching process as a "gentle rhetoric for a prophetic community."<sup>2</sup> She also states that preaching is a profoundly dangerous occupation because it calls us to lay our hearts and our lives on the line (to put ourselves out there); fundamentally, it is a shared activity, rather than something we alone control.<sup>3</sup>

The Spirit gets our attention through the responses of those who choose to hear us, says Clader. In preaching we must be conscious of our audience, the community, and the world. We look beyond ourselves. By no means do we want to appear foolish, ill-prepared, or out of touch; nor do we want to mislead (mess up someone's "theology") or discourage those who have gifted us with their attention and their trust.

We must preach the truth we feel with careful thought for those who hear; for truth and love must try to sense what others feel, what others fear. Knowing this, Christ will be present in the Word proclaimed, and our preaching will be part of that proclamation. ❖

## NOTES

1. Renita Weems, *Showing Mary: How Women Can Share Prayers, Wisdom and the Blessings of God*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 14.

*Continued on page 21*

## More Light and More Truth

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DANIEL G. CONKLIN

God, grant that more light and more truth  
may break forth from your holy Word.

I frequently begin my sermon with this one-line prayer, a prayer based on the famous words of Pastor John Robinson to the departing pilgrims as they set sail for the New World in 1620. It seems a most appropriate way to start not only a sermon, but also the whole process of creating one. It expresses if not the conviction at the very least the hope that there is more light and more truth “in there” (the Bible) and “out there” (the world). It is perhaps first of all an acknowledgment of the ineffable mystery of the One, whose Good News we hope to proclaim. We do not and cannot have a corner on God. No words can ever exhaust the Word. Perhaps that’s the first step in a creative process of finding and putting together the right words for any given time and place: allowing a Mosaic mindset to take hold of us, barefoot before the Burning Bush as it were, and hearing once again the Divine *Tetragrammaton*: I Am Who I Am ~ I Am Who I Will Be. As we seek to dis-cover (literally, un-cover) the more light and more truth “in there” (the Bible) and “out there” (the world), it seems we may start in either place:

**We may start with the Bible.** We can quietly read through the appointed readings of the Revised Common Lectionary and simply see which word or words, which phrase or phrases, *jump out* at us, in either a positive or a negative way. Whether positive or negative doesn’t seem to matter: it’s the *jumping out* that is important. What memories or associations do the words awaken? I have often discovered that the words that jump out from the text are the ones that lead to more light and more truth.

And what if no words jump out from the text? Most preachers would acknowledge that words on a page, even a page of the Bible, can seem static, abstract, and lifeless. It’s a call to dig deeper. The opening words of Thomas Mann’s epic *Joseph and His Brothers* are these: “Deep is the well of the past. Should we not call it bottomless?”<sup>1</sup>

Digging deeper might mean delving into the original words and seeking the meaning(s) of key words in the text, using scholarly resources to unpack their etymologies, finding how (and by whom) the words were used, tracing the footprints of a word as it has been used over time and how it changes in translation. Such an endeavor sometimes

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can lead to more light and more truth, and sometimes (let's be truthful here) it does not. Other approaches to the text also can bear rich fruit: to read the text against the grain and/or to read imaginatively between the lines of the text; to imagine the text (if it happens to be a narrative) as a silent film, envisioning the exaggerated facial expressions on the faces of the *dramatis personae*; or to retell the story from the perspective of one of the characters in it, perhaps one of the minor characters. All of these approaches are really—basically, simply, and in accordance with Judeo-Christian traditions—nothing more than creating a *Midrash* of the text. Letting the story retell itself in a fresh way can often lead to more light and more truth, whose breaking forth we, as preachers, hope to facilitate.

**We may start with the world.** The suggestion, attributed to Karl Barth, is that one should read the Bible on the one hand and the newspaper on the other.<sup>2</sup> In this light, preachers might begin with an article in the daily newspaper, or with the bumper sticker on the car ahead, or with a remark heard while standing in line at the grocery store. They might begin with any of these “pieces” of the world, a world (preachers sometimes have to remind themselves) that is loved by God. The trick here is to pay attention. To pay attention is actually to pray, according to the poet W.H. Auden: “To pray is to pay attention to something or someone other than oneself.”<sup>3</sup>

Paying attention is so hard because we are so easily distracted; we inwardly rehash the past or speculate about the future, and we miss the present. We miss perhaps the profound paradox in some fresh ambiguity. We do not hear “what the spirit is saying to God’s people.” Starting with the world might mean mining our memories for stories in which God’s presence has been felt in the past. Starting with the world means having no boundaries. Can we see more light and perceive more truth in a scientific discovery or new scientific theory, in a contemporary novel or poem, in a movie currently in the theaters, or a comic strip in the Sunday paper? Perhaps there is a need to investigate what your congregation is paying attention to—how and where they get their news, what books they read, which television programs they watch—and then to pay attention to these as well.

Of course, starting with the world does not mean having no connection to the word of scripture. If we start with the world, we need to be careful that the connection we make with the biblical text is not superficial, artificial, or contrived. In the perception of the rightness of a connection, at precisely that juncture, more light and more truth may indeed break forth.

Whether we start with the Bible or start with world, what we hope emerges is the consoling but also challenging light and truth of God, of which there is always more.

We limit not the truth of God to our poor reach of mind,  
 To notions of our day and place, crude, partial and confined;  
 No, let a new and better hope within our hearts be stirred;  
 O God, grant yet more light and truth to break forth from your word.<sup>4</sup> ❖

**NOTES**

1. Thomas Mann, *Joseph and His Brothers*, Trans. John E. Woods, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).
2. Accessed online, September 18, 2010 at <http://libweb.ptsem.edu/collections/barth/faq/quotes.aspx?menu=296&subText=468>
3. W.H. Auden, "Prayer, Nature of," in *A Certain World*, (New York: Viking, 1970).
4. Hymn 316, *The New Century Hymnal*, (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1995).

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**And I Shall Preach**

*Continued from page 18*

2. Linda L. Clader, *Voicing the Vision: Imagination and Prophetic Preaching* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2003), 160.
3. Clader, 2.

## The Word on the Street

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Laura R. Holck

**M**onday mornings are a time for unwinding. I take two companions on my morning walk: the Holy Spirit and a 4x6 index card with the scripture lesson for the upcoming Sunday. As I walk, I pray, thankful for the day and for the preaching task, inviting the Holy Spirit to join me, to speak to me, to guide me. I read the scripture. I walk. I pray. I begin to engage the lesson. I begin to read, to study, to learn it by heart.

Writing the text out on a card used to be a spiritual discipline itself, but after many years of preaching Sunday after Sunday, I have a pretty full file box of cards. Quite often, I find the text I need already in the box and take it on my walk.

So begins my preaching week, with a walk, a card, and openness to hear God's voice. As I learn the scripture, I often ask God, "What do you want your people to hear?" I begin in submission, grateful for the process, and asking God to use me as a vessel, to join me as a partner in the task of bringing the Word to people. I walk like this every morning, for forty-five minutes to an hour, with the word and our God, trying to stay present and keep my mind open.

It's a spiritual, emotional, and physical task, this walking. I usually know the words by heart by Tuesday morning. Then I begin walking with blank 3x5 cards. I walk and pray and tell myself the word out loud. I listen and walk.

Strange and interesting things happen on the road. After all, it's a busy place! I meet people. I see animals and birds, both alive and dead. I find all manner of discarded junk and valuables, even money. (Not long ago, I even found a working 30GB iPod!) I encounter all sorts of weather.

As I walk, I process the stuff of living, and thoughts and questions come and go. I jot them down on the 3x5 cards I carry with me, because connections between life and God and the scripture are everywhere ... in the market, the post office, in art, in conversation. I wonder things when I work around the house; I make connections in Bible study, meetings, in the news; in nearly every encounter, I wonder what the other has experienced. I never know when thoughts or questions will come. Not wanting to lose anything, each idea—each thing no matter how remotely connected to the text—goes on a card.

By Friday, it's time to study. I don't read Hebrew, but I often go to the Greek and to various English translations, mining the text for linguistic and etymological nuggets.

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*The Reverend Laura R. Holck is on leave from call and a student of the ACTS Doctor of Ministry in Preaching Program in Chicago. She is a member of the "Slayers" cohort.*

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I check in with scholars and commentators; I talk to my peers; I study with parishioners. Anything of interest goes on a card.

The real fun begins on Saturday. A sea of cards awaits me, every one vying for a place in the sermon. I lay them out, rearrange them, take one look and then another. Themes emerge. God speaks. Cards are discarded and rearranged. I arrange them in categories: situations, complications, direct connections to the text, celebration.<sup>1</sup> I look for depth in human experience, universal appeal, movement, and God's life-giving grace at work. I write more cards. I take many cards away. Often I study more.

My sermon draft looks like a bunch of cards in a stack. I study the sermon's basic movement, but I also know it's not finished yet. The Holy Spirit often wakes me in the night, or early in the morning, with new ideas, new words, new inspiration. The sermon often changes form while I sleep. Sometimes, it is completely regenerated without my help at all.

Saturday night, I fall asleep, grateful, open, and praying. I often pray along these lines: "Holy Spirit, thank you for this preaching life. Continue to use all these things. Enter in, even as I sleep, and bring your life-giving Word to your people. You alone know what they need. Thank you that you do not leave me to figure it out alone. I give all these things to you."

I wake early Sunday morning. God and I walk with the scripture text and the stack of cards that is my rough sermon. I carry blank cards. Sunday's walk is quieter than any other; without school or work, the roadways are silent and empty. As we walk with the text, the sermon expands, contracts, grows, and changes.

The morning is a meditative time, when I offer my work to God and give thanks for how preaching shapes my view of the world, my interactions with others, my family, my work, my life, and most importantly, the community who gathers to worship and encounter the God who made us all.

I have preached from a manuscript from time to time, but I preach my best when I am simply being with people and saying what there is to say. With a sermon outline deeply imbedded, preaching without notes is no trouble at all, and I am free to be myself, as God has me be, not worried whether I'm saying things right or not. I've learned to trust the sermon's working in me.

As worship begins, I offer all of my preparation to God, beg forgiveness for the corners I have cut, and ask God to inhabit the whole of our worship. It is God's time.

I offer the scripture from memory and preach the incarnate word of grace. ❖

#### NOTE

1. On designing sermons that celebrate God's redemptive grace, see Frank A. Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*, (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1997).

## The Christly “Whatever”

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TOREY LIGHTCAP

The making of art is an intersection, or a transom, where a thing maintains its essential thingness, but also becomes a different thing. Art-making is alchemy: The material, the matter of which it is constructed, is transformed into message. That message can be “whatever”—whatever the artist allows, whatever the audience perceives, whatever unspoken agreements run or do not run between the two parties. This “whatever”—you know, “art”—is provocation, emotion, transcendence, conflict, imagination. Whatever.

Electricity in the brain runs through neural pathways where ideas are formed and tested; then, the whole shebang gets kicked over to the language centers, where it’s given proportion, rationality, heft. The brain whispers to the fingers, Do this, Do that, and magically the idea spills out into fingertips on a keyboard: tippety-tappety clackety clack, where the screen records the notion for later sifting and sorting, liking or unliking. Delete, delete, delete; or Yes, say more, say more.

Somewhere—or everywhere—that we allow, the Spirit intercedes, with sighs too deep, making music out of our feeble, overeducated, caffeine-weary prose. This we call sermonizing.

For me, any “art” is incidental to the bargain I’ve made with the Gospel—happy little accidents realized well after the fact. A phrase pops up; it seems to fit; the fingers and the keyboard oblige. I employ no conscious effort to make “art.” I only want to make a sermon; only sometimes, that same Spirit has other complementary designs in mind.

I do not mean that I am some hollow bone through whose marrow divine communication runs its sparkly flow; such pretensions are wearying, and Artists who claim as much can be insufferable and boorish. I only mean that, sometimes, something emerges—something lovely and small-boned, and entirely appropriate to and discovered on the path I’m walking, in my Gospel journey from Point A to Point B.

My own medium, if I may be bold, is the compelling phrase. Putting interesting-sounding words together in an interesting-sounding order is all I’ve been good at, all I’ve ever had the temerity to want to work at, all of anything that’s made plain sense to me. “The desire to write grows with writing,” Erasmus wrote, and I would add that the desire to do anything else wanes as the desire to write increases.

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*The Reverend Torey Lightcap is Rector at St. Thomas Episcopal Church, in Sioux City, Iowa. He is part of the “Preacher as Artist” cohort.*

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To be perfectly frank, my “whatever”—my output—used to be me. I would have made a fine *Artiste*. Over time, though, liturgically and in the Daily Office, I watched the Jesus of the Gospels make his dreadful pilgrimage, set his face toward Jerusalem. Again and again and again, dying and dying and rising and rising, the disciples always mute with surprise.

It seems my “whatever” is still too much of me, that I am still too full of myself, that my personal mythology is greater than any other within me. I’m still sold on the “whatever” of me.

But now, at least, perhaps there are the beginnings of a difference. I try to let the Spirit in—to let it do what it will, as if I could resist too much—and *sometimes*, sometimes, the “whatever” is Christ.

God be praised.



## The Discipline of Seeing

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ROBERT S. RICE

**F**or the past two years, the cohort group to which I belong has reflected on the topic, “Art and the Pastoral Imagination.” The creative act of preaching—much like the work of the visual artist—requires first and foremost a discipline of seeing. At least three dimensions of the discipline of seeing are critical in any attempt to engage those who gather in worship each Sunday in a conversation with the text that witnesses to the God we see in Jesus:

- Being faithful to what we see rather than what we know
- Perceiving what is not there, yet what is meant to be
- Seeing beyond what is apparent to that which is transcendent

**What we see and not what we know.** As I climbed into the pulpit right out of seminary, the scrubbed faces, bright smiles, and tailored clothes that greeted me on Sunday mornings were all I knew of the congregation to which I tried to preach. I think now of Annie Dillard’s account of looking out on an open meadow and seeing a picture-perfect stand of trees in the distance. After walking across the meadow and examining the trees up close, she recalls, “Every leaf had been bit and chewed.”<sup>1</sup>

A friend and I offered a drawing class to classmates at Princeton Seminary. We assembled a still-life on a small table; one of the students drew a reasonable likeness of the objects, except for a coffee can that was sitting at an angle. What she had done with the can did not look right to her, but she could not figure out what was wrong. The problem was that she knew that the top of the coffee can was a perfect circle, and so she drew what she knew, rather than the elliptical shape she actually saw.

Preaching without a discipline of seeing leads to superficial exegesis of both congregation and text; it also allows our conceptual framework and dogmatic convictions to trump what we actually see and experience. As philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote, reflecting on his early philosophy, “A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.”<sup>2</sup> A discipline of seeing challenges us to speak of what we see, and not of what we know.

**Seeing what is not yet but meant to be.** A second discipline of seeing is seeing in the way of a sculptor—seeing what is not there but what is meant to be.

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*The Reverend Dr. Bob Rice is Pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Norman, Oklahoma. He is a member of the “Art and the Pastoral Imagination” cohort.*

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In 1947, Korczak Ziocowski began work on a Native American memorial in the Black Hills of South Dakota. It is an image of Chief Crazy Horse, an image taller than the Washington Monument, an image whose head could contain all of the presidents on Mount Rushmore. Millions of tons of rock have already been chiseled from the side of the mountain. Korczak died in 1982, but his family continues work on the mountain. His son, Casimir, describing the gigantic figure that rests within the mountain, says it was there before he was born and that it may still remain uncovered when he dies.<sup>3</sup> If you or I had walked by the same mountain, we likely would never have seen it. Unlike Korczak, we would not have seen what was not yet apparent.

I recall overhearing a secretary I worked with telling a parishioner, who was complaining about the rough edges of a particular person, “When I encounter someone like that, I try to see Jesus in him.” Deep within the awkward and rough exterior of our lives there lies the image of Christ, waiting for the vision of a Sculptor to bring it forth. As the writer of 1 John affirms, “We are God’s children now. It does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”

**Seeing through.** A third discipline of seeing is the ability to catch a glimpse of the transcendent leaching through the material field of our senses. The tradition of the Eastern Orthodox icon reflects the discipline of this kind of seeing as a form of prayer.

Annie Dillard tells of the day she was walking along Tinker Creek when she saw the tree with the lights in it:

I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost, charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. I stood on the grass with the lights in it, grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused . . . It was less like seeing than like being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance . . . I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck.<sup>4</sup>

This way of seeing includes an overwhelming sense of not so much seeing as of having been seen. For preachers who have “eyes to see,” the world that God so loves, the scriptures, the people who gather in worship, can become icons—windows, images—through which the transcendent God lifts and strikes us.

**A proper perspective.** Of course, seeing is all about perspective. Gesa E. Thiessen, in her book *Theology and Modern Irish Art*, writes, “ultimately true seeing and genuine understanding happen through affection and love, a love free of naivety or sentimentality. The old notion, that one must love a person or something to really know him, her, or it, is pertinent. In this way seeing becomes profound, creative, and a possibility for healing or transformation.”<sup>5</sup>

The preacher must develop a disciplined life of seeing—to see what is there, what is meant to be, what is transcendent—and love what she sees to truly perceive and render it.

Over the years I have learned that all good preaching arises out of the relationship with a worshipping community. It is the difference between looking at a picture post-

card and seeing up close. It is also a rendering that is done with great care. Korczak Ziolkowski's final words to his family were these: "You must work on the mountain, but you must do it slowly so you do it right."<sup>6</sup> Proximity and care are the refractions of love out of which all preaching must grow; without them, we preachers, no matter how insightful, are but "noisy gongs and clanging symbols."<sup>7</sup> ❖

#### NOTES

1. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974), 233.
2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), sect. 115, 48.
3. Michael Pearce, "Indian in the Mountain," *Wall Street Journal*, 1 July 1988.
4. Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 35.
5. Gesa Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics* (Eerdmans, 2004), 248.
6. "Indian in the Mountain"
7. 1 Corinthians 13:1

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## The Gift of the Frame

DAYNA KINKADE

Early in my ministry, I had one of those panic-stricken moments when the clock was ticking and no sermon was coming. I had to come up with a sermon for an ecumenical Thanksgiving service on a Sunday evening after saying everything I had to say on Sunday morning. There was not a drop left in my shallow well. In a fit of desperation, I reached for a little inspiration from Frederick Buechner, hoping to find a sermon-worthy entry on “thanksgiving” in his book, *Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized*. The sermon was written, but the inspiration came not from the letter “t” but from the letter “a”: The entry was on the word “art.” Buechner spoke of art as a frame around a moment. The frame, he said, “makes possible a second thought.”

In a moment of grace, and in the nick of time, the words “consider the lilies” and “look at the birds” were transformed; they became invitations to “frame” that which we so often overlook. I had my thanksgiving sermon and more. That one idea of “framing the moment” has directly influenced my process of sermon preparation and delivery.

What if I could paint, with words, a picture that might cause others to pause for a second thought? I began to shape my sermons around one controlling image, lifting it from the passage and then crafting the sermon as if we were looking at it from different vantage points, letting it speak for itself. My sermons almost always end where they begin, as if to complete the frame.

On my best days, I would hardly call what I deliver on Sunday mornings “art.” And yet, if I can invite folks to join me for a few moments, to take a second look at what our glazed eyes so easily miss, what is framed becomes holy. I do the work. I read the commentaries. I read blogs and “Google” words, all in search of that one moment that beckons to be framed and shared. Then, with God’s help, I share it as my offering. Like art, not every sermonic work is appreciated. Yet, if it provokes that second look, I can let it go. ❖

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*The Reverend Dayna Kinkade is Pastor at Norwalk Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), in Norwalk, Iowa. She is a member of the “New Wineskins” cohort.*

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*The following books are recommendations by the faculty of Austin Seminary:*

**John Ahn**

*Introduction to Second Temple* by Lester Grabbe (Continuum International, 2010). Grabbe provides an important and fascinating overview of the essentials that were necessary for the rise of early Judaism. Without this pretext, the rise of the Jesus movement would have been nearly impossible.

*Constructing Jesus* by Dale C. Allison Jr. (Baker, 2010). The historical quest for Jesus has been around since the days of David Strauss and Albert Schweitzer. This work provides a reframing that seeks to go beyond the past of Jesus as a sage, a prophet, and aphorist. It's a passion laden quest.

**John Alsup**

*An Introduction to the New Testament Manuscripts and Their Texts* by D.C. Parker (Cambridge, 2008). It has been about forty years now since the publishing of Bruce Metzger's wonderful survey of New Testament textual criticism and now this exciting new addition to the discipline offers itself for pastor/scholars of today. It is user-friendly and provides computerized access to original Greek manuscripts as never before.

*A Language Older Than Words* by Derrick Jensen (Chelsea Green, 2004). This book, recommended by Bill Greenway, offers exciting possibilities for discussions about communication and respect for life within the entire world of the descendants from Noah's Ark.

**Whitney Bodman**

*Christianity in Jewish Terms, Theology in a Postcritical Key*, edited by Tikva Frymer-Kensky, David Novak, Peter Ochs, David Fox Sandmel, and Michael A. Singer, (Westview Press, 2000). This is the most successful effort that I know of to have Jews and Christians think theologically together. The reflections and responses by leading thinkers in both traditions are creative, informed, provocative and accessible.

*Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* by Paul Knitter (OneWorld Press, 2009). Knitter is a Roman Catholic priest who has been engaged with interfaith theology, and especially with Buddhism for decades—and is married to a Buddhist. This is Buddhist theology and Christianity theology in a deep, exploratory, and very personal, conversation.

**Alan Cole**

*Giving Counsel: A Minister's Guidebook*, by Donald Capps (Chalice Press, 2001). This is a thorough, assessable, and wise book on the giving of counsel by ministers, written by the preeminent pastoral theologian of his era. It incorporates some of the best practices drawn from a range of approaches that have proven faithful and effective over time.

*Understanding Psychosis: Issues and Challenges for Sufferers, Families, and Friends* by Don-

ald Capps (Rowan & Littlefield, 2010). This insightful, humane, and wide-ranging book helps ministers understand mental illness, mentally ill persons, and those who live with them as family members, friends, and communities. Capps brilliantly shines light on how personal strengths possessed by mentally ill persons along with the social supports that others can provide, serve to making living with mental illness, and with the mentally ill, more life-giving.

**Bill Greenway**

*God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* by Terence Fretheim (Abingdon Press, 2005). An accessible re-reading of the Hebrew scriptures with the dimensions of God's covenantal relation not only to humans but to all creation taken into account.

*For the Beauty of the Earth* by S. Bouma-Prediger, (2nd edition, Baker Academic, 2010). A solid introduction to the basic parameters of the environmental crisis and the connections to Christian theology, written from an evangelical perspective.

**Dave Jensen**

*The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million* by Daniel Mendelsohn. Weaving together family stories, eyewitness reports, and biblical narratives, Mendelsohn conducts a search for Holocaust survivors from a village where his own relatives were killed. The result is a stunning display of memory, horror, and hope.

**David Johnson**

*The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross* by Rowan Williams (Crowley, 1990). A history of Christian Spirituality by the current Archbishop of Canterbury, which is also a sustained consideration of what it means to live as a Christian.

*The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* by Beldon Lane (Oxford, 1998). Most works on spirituality tend to hover somewhere between the personal and the abstract. Lane combines them as he explores the apophatic stream of Christian spirituality and remembers being at the bedside of his dying mother.

**Timothy Lincoln**

*Mind, Language, and Society: Philosophy in the Real World* by John R. Searle (Basic Books, 1998). Reading this book will make you want to read more philosophy, not less.

*Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God* by Rainer Maria Rilke, translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy (Riverhead Books, 2005). Read this book one or two poems at a time to ponder the mystery of the connection between God and us.

**Jennifer Lord**

*Birthing the Sermon: Women Preachers on the Creative Process*, Jana Childers, ed., (Chalice, 2001). This collection of essays and sermons still reveals: true lives of preachers, ser-

mons shaped to contexts, the variety of sermon preparation modes and processes, insights for nurturing theological precision, imagination, and the preacher's energy.

**Eugene March**

*The Man Who Knew God: Decoding Jeremiah* by Mordecai Schreiber (Rowman & Littlefield, 2010). In this book Rabbi Schreiber presents an interesting approach into the still relevant and troubling book of Jeremiah.

*A Reporter's Life* by Walter Cronkite (Ballantine Books, 1996). I only recently came upon this book because of the special exhibit over at the LBJ Library. The book reads easily and will be of special interest to those who have lived through the past years when Cronkite was actively maintaining excellence in reporting the news and not the propaganda.

**Cynthia Rigby**

*Christ the Key*, by Kathryn Tanner (Cambridge, 2010). This is a beautiful book, the first volume of the expansion of the systematic theology Tanner earlier outlined in *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity*. In it, Tanner brings into play all that she is as a disciple of Jesus Christ, constructive theologian, and expert in the history of christological doctrine.

*Mark*, by William Placher (Westminster John Knox Press, 2010). This is the last book Placher wrote before he died, and the first in the new theological commentary series he envisioned and brought to birth, if not to full growth. It may very well be his most important work, fluid and insightful.

**Kristin Saldine**

*Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies* by Marilyn Chandler McEntyre (Eerdmans, 2009). In a series of beautiful essays, McEntyre reminds us that we are stewards of words and encourages us to reclaim them as "instruments of love, healing and peace."

*Preaching in an Age of Globalization* by Eunjoo Mary Kim (Westminster John Knox, 2010). Kim offers a new paradigm of transcontextual preaching to help preachers consider the dynamic challenges of globalization.

**Ted Wardlaw**

*This Odd and Wondrous Calling* by Lillian Daniel and Martin B. Copenhaver (Eerdmans, 2009). This book is a collection of essays on the ministry by two of the finest "best practices" pastors I know. The essays cover the range of a pastor's private and public life, and are rich in their theological, emotional, and spiritual depth.

*The Pastor* by Gordon Lathrop (Fortress, 2006). Lathrop writes beautifully of the pastor's life, particularly as it is rooted in the liturgical life of the church. But this is not a "how-to" book regarding how to preside as a liturgist; it is an extended meditation on the faithful symbolic authority of a pastor in all of his or her vocation. ❖



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