

Living with the Text

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Opening the Text

I HAVE THE BEST job in town. Every Tuesday morning, I arrive at my study, open my Bible at the passage for this week's sermon, and begin to read the text. Sometimes I am looking for the passage almost as soon as I have finished last Sunday's sermon—an admission that I guess shows how "sad" I am. And if not Sunday, then certainly by Tuesday morning, I am in the text once again, ready to practice again the ancient craft of preparing a sermon for the congregation. American homiletician Thomas Long describes this activity as witness: the congregation sending the preacher out week after week to listen to the word of God, and then bringing back a message to the congregation. It is an arresting image.¹ And having done this for nearly twenty years now, and being thoroughly convinced that it is both essential as well as historic, I am truly happy to do this work. It is one of the great boons of pastoral ministry.

The beauty of a text, of course, is that it is given to you. Preaching from the lectionary, or working one's way through a Bible book, as I do, means that we don't have to go scratching around on a Tuesday morning for a text, trying to decide prophetically what the Spirit is saying to the church. Instead, we ask what the Spirit is saying to the church through

1. See Long, *Witness of Preaching*.

the passage of Scripture that has been given to us this week. My own view about this practice is that such respect of the given text is potentially every bit as prophetic as a charismatic utterance, since the Scripture itself is a prophetic challenge to the powers of this age. Our familiarity with the Scriptures means we tend to forget that.² In fact, one could argue that a commitment to routinized preaching through the Scriptures is more prophetic, for instead of the congregation wondering why it is the preacher that is having a go at them about a particular subject, or why it is that he has chosen a particular passage this week (a decision that is often quite subjective), in this scenario both congregation and preacher find themselves gathering around the objectivity of a given word, having to submit to both its demands as well as its promises. As early as Tuesday morning the preacher is aware that they are the first person to hear the gospel summons as a word external to them.³

In that sense, I have never quite understood the distinction between study that is for a sermon and study that is more devotional (just as I have not really understood the negativity that surrounds theology, as if intellectual enquiry is antithetic to the life of faith), for in reality (and every preacher knows this, if they are honest), it is almost impossible to detach the reading of the Bible from the preaching of the Bible. Preaching the Bible in a congregational setting is the Bible's natural habitat.⁴ And though one needs to be careful that preparation for preaching doesn't become the sole reason why we preachers open our Bibles, nevertheless pouring over the Scriptures week after week in order to discover a message is just about the most wonderful way of encountering Scripture as well as growing in a life of faith. It is what Eugene Peterson calls "vocational holiness," and it is one of the reasons why pastors who preach every week have a sporting chance of godliness.⁵ Indeed, if we were to describe things more existentially, I often wonder if that is all preaching is: one person wrestling with the text and with their soul before God and before this congregation.

2. Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*.

3. See Willimon, *Conversations with Barth on Preaching*, for an elaboration on this point. Like Willimon, I have a number of problems with Barth's anti-rhetoric, as well as his strange inability, despite all he says about the importance of exegesis, to preach the actual text. What I do love about Barth, however, is his insistence that the gospel cannot be read off from nature but is always in the first instance a word external to ourselves—not simply intratextual but extratextual.

4. Willimon, *Shaped by the Bible*, 47.

5. See Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*.

Which brings us onto another preliminary point: the question of the inspiration of Scripture. Is the Bible inerrant? Is it infallible? Personally, I have never really been switched on by the word “inerrant.” If the matter came to a head and I had to deny inerrancy or face the execution squad, I reckon I could defend the word. But to me inerrancy is a nineteenth-century word; a utilitarian word that fails to do justice to the beauty of Scripture. Arguing the case for inerrancy is akin to taking down a Rembrandt off the wall and putting up a flow chart in its place. It just doesn’t have the same appeal somehow. Apart from which, it is unnecessary. As any preacher will tell you: handling the Scriptures each week in the form that we have them, delighting in the artistry of the text, the subtleties of language and, above all, the consistency of the narrative, carries its own authentication. As J. B. Philips said, apparently, having finished his translations of the New Testament, the thing is alive. We are handling mysteries. When I open my Bible on a Tuesday morning in order to find the text for this week’s sermon, I really ought to be putting on gloves. It’s like a precious jewel.

Text Work

And so begins the process of working with the text, letting the text speak for itself rather than imposing my own grid upon it. And this requires time—more time than most of us are prepared to give it. Given our propensity to jump to conclusions, or to want to make something relevant of the Bible, it is likely we will find a word, before the word finds us. So urgent has the need for application become in our day, the Bible ends up as nothing more than a manual for the congregation. As it says on a wayside pulpit that I passed the other day: BIBLE: Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth.

But if we have the courage, we must at this point simply be in the text. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer remarked in his little known lectures on preaching with reference to the task of exegesis: “The torment of waiting for fresh ideas disappears under serious textual work. The text has more than enough thoughts. One really only needs to say what is in it.”⁶ In other words, we do not need to bring to the text our preconceived jokes, our already determined theological grid, or a recently read illustration just waiting for a sermon to fit it. All these can wait. Rather, we need to

6. Bonhoeffer, *Worldly Preaching*, 25.

simply listen to the text, letting the text itself suggest the form as well as the content of our message.⁷ This is especially the case if we have been preaching a long time, but is just as important if we have only just started out. Some texts are so well-known to us that there is every chance we won't even read them, let alone hear them. Add to that the tendency for preachers to grind their theological axes and the result is often bad news for the congregation. But by listening to the text, there is every chance that we will avoid this, and enter instead into what Barth famously referred to as "the strange new world" of the Scriptures.

Commentaries are wonderful in this regard. They are one of the lost treasures of the church that urgently need to be retrieved. For sure, most commentaries don't tell us anything new. They go over old ground, and oftentimes simply repeat what others have said. Furthermore, there is always the issue of how quickly one jumps to the commentaries. Darrell Johnson advocates leaving the commentaries until we have had a chance ourselves to write out, listen to, and even memorize the text.⁸ But that aside (and my own view is that we need not be too prescriptive on this), what commentaries insist on, as Dominican preacher Timothy Radcliffe points out, is that we slow down, linger with the words and phrases, and take seriously the context in which the word of God is presented to us. We live in a Christian culture that is desperate to be relevant, quick to apply, and anxious to be topical. But what a commentary helps us to do is put aside for a moment the important task of application and simply immerse ourselves in the immediacy of the narrative: in a sense defamiliarizing ourselves with this Bible we think we know in order that we might hear it afresh, as if for the first time. Of commentaries Radcliffe notes that "a vast amount of erudition produces only a little light, but they slow down one's eye. . . . If one follows the text slowly with the help of an exegete, then one may recapture a sense of its foreignness. The spell of over-familiarity may be broken and we will be puzzled."⁹

Just so. The heart of all great communication is defamiliarization.¹⁰ Jesus did it, Paul did it, and if one thinks about it, all great preaching that we have ever heard has at its core the element of surprise. We think we know this story, we may even know what we think about this story, but

7. Lischer, *The End of Words*, 49–87.

8. Johnson, *The Glory of Preaching*, 110.

9. Radcliffe, *Why Go to Church?* 49.

10. See K. Case-Green, "Text and Defamiliarization" in this volume.

the preacher comes along and purges us of clichés and platitudes by telling the text as it really is, often with scandalous results. By staying with the text long enough we realize that David is not the idealized king, so beloved of pietistic preaching, but a somewhat ambiguous character;¹¹ that Paul's letter to the Romans is not a Reformation tract against Romish corruption, but a pastoral appeal for unity around the cross in the face ethnic pride;¹² and that even a cursory reading of the Gospels reveals Jesus not so much "meek and mild" but, as Mark Galli puts it, "mean and wild."¹³ In other words, lingering with the text lights up the message.

Pastor as Exegete

All of this listening presupposes, of course, the need for time and silence. Given the demands of modern church life, and the need for the pastor to double up as CEO, not to mention the noise of the church office, this is more easily said than done. As T. S. Eliot says in the poem *Ash Wednesday*: "Where shall the word be found, where will the word/Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence."¹⁴ At which point I propose, somewhat romantically I admit, that we change the title "office" into "study," and "church leader" into "church theologian," hoping in some way to protest against the awful trivialization of the preacher's call in our day. How can we expect our sermons to be worth listening to, if we ourselves have not had the time to eat the word? Because this is what preaching is: digesting the word so that instead of just a set of notes, we carry something internal—a kind of pregnancy. If we are rushing around our congregations trying to be Messiah, or, more specifically, if we commit too early to paper for the sake of having at least something to say on Sunday, this conception cannot take place.

11. See Peterson, *Leap Over a Wall*, for an example of how to let the text speak. Not only are these sermons object lessons in narrative preaching, they are also a great rejoinder to so much pious nonsense about David as the ideal king. As Peterson says, what we have with David is not an ideal life but an actual life, which is why, in my opinion, David is so compelling, for in the end it is with God that we have to deal with in the David stories, and not some moral paragon.

12. See Wright, *Fresh Perspectives*, for an explanation of this new approach to Pauline theology, although quite why he is so dismissive of Lutheran hermeneutics is strange to me. It is not anachronistic, in my opinion, or an example of eisegesis, to read a law/grace tension in Paul's letters.

13. Galli, *Jesus Mean and Wild*.

14. "Ash Wednesday," in Eliot, *Collected Poems*, 102.

Of course, sometimes a sermon can come to us in one hour. Other weeks we are fighting for each sentence. But always, whether it takes an hour or eight hours, we are looking for the fresh angle, a way of saying it, that is not necessarily original—the sermon doesn't need to be original—but does justice to the originality of the text. Once this angle has been located, the rest is easy. As Craig Barnes puts it, in describing the preacher's search for this primal word: "I never begin to write that sermon without that line from above. It is the little miracle that wins me over and convinces me that this sermon is exactly what the congregation, and I, most need to hear."¹⁵

People don't see this work, which is perhaps why we feel uneasy about it. It cannot be accounted for. Much of this work takes place other than in the church: out walking, driving in the car, lying in the bath. The conception can happen almost anywhere. But happen it must if our sermons are to carry the day, and not fall to the ground. The very center of the preaching vocation is getting into the text, feeling the burden of the word, letting the Scripture act prophetically so that there is a burden to our song. Expository preaching is not line-by-line exegesis of a text. It is a mistake to portray it this way. Rather, it is uncovering the burden of the text, so that what the preacher does is do to the congregation what the text did to its original hearers. And of course depending on what that text is, our sermon may range from being cryptic parable to outright exhortation. It just depends. As Richard Lischer puts it, if the text is a song, then our sermon will need to sing; if it is a parable, then we will need to be parabolic; if it is a narrative, then we will need to become storytellers—or at least observe the *spirit* of the genre.¹⁶ In other words, the text determines not just what is said, but how it is said; not just the content but the form also. We do an injustice to the text if we try to make John for instance sound like Paul; or if we make of the Israelites marching round the walls of Jericho a three-point sermon, every point beginning with "p." It seems, to me at least, that to do justice to the text we must have our congregations, in their imaginations, marching around the walls also, noticing the battlements, and wondering what on earth the Lord is up to.

And thus begins the process of committing to paper—a dangerous thing, to be sure, since preaching is an oral event. So when we say committing to paper, it is always with a view to hearing one's voice. And of

15. Barnes, *Pastor as Minor Poet*, 125.

16. Lischer, *End of Words*, 82. See also D. Ridder's chapter, "Genre-Sensitive Preaching," in this volume.

course writing down a sermon can in itself release a certain creativity in this regard. Depending on one's creative impulse, sometimes it is only as we begin to write that the word comes to us. Again, how late we leave this is a moot point. I know preachers who say that we ought to have our sermon finished by Wednesday—Thursday at the latest. And for years I felt guilty about that. Thursday, and I am only just beginning to get a feel of what is going on. Indeed, it may not be until Friday that we begin to commit to paper. The gestation is only just beginning. To circumvent that by needing to have everything down by Wednesday is the homiletical equivalent of a premature birth. In fact, it may be as late as the early hours of Sunday morning that we put our final full stop, print out our sermon, and go off for a shower. This is not lack of preparation (although if it is, then it is inexcusable) but if anything, over preparation, and is related as well to the not unusual practice of wanting to preach one's sermon out, or at least parts of it, just prior to the event of preaching. The last thing we want to be in the pulpit is reliant on our notes. We want to be free.¹⁷ So by preaching the sermon out before hand, whether in an empty church, or in a field, or driving in the car, we learn to feed the sermon on to the bobbin of our consciousness.

And here is the wonderful thing: it is often only then that we understand what the Lord wants to say in our message: only by preaching it out that we get to feel internally the weight of the word for that day. Numerous times, it is only when I finally get to preach the sermon out, internalizing some of the images, familiarizing myself with the flow of my own thought, that I understand what I have been doing all week. It is a dangerous occupation, to be sure. One more than one occasion I have startled an early morning dog walker, minding their own business; and in the days before hands-free mobile phones, I guess the sight of a man driving along, speaking into an empty car, must have been an odd sight indeed. It still is, in fact. But risks aside, what these times achieve for the preacher is critical for the immediacy of the sermon: not so much memorizing the sermon (to remember a sermon word for word could very much stifle the creativity of the Spirit), but internalizing the message for that day.

And then comes the final discipline of preparation, and perhaps the most difficult of all, which is waiting to stand up and deliver the sermon. Preachers are notoriously bad at this. They chomp at the bit, waiting for that moment when it is their turn to climb into the pulpit, thus rendering

17. Ellsworth, *Power of Speaking God's Word*. See also R. May, "Preaching without Notes" in this volume.

the rest of the service redundant, or rendering themselves an irritation to the person leading the service. Is there anything worse than trying to converse with a preacher who is waiting to preach? So a bit of advice from Episcopalian Robert Capon: having got one's sermon notes together, arrived at the church, and said hello to a few people, forget the sermon altogether, trusting that God will resurrect it in the pulpit at the appropriate time.¹⁸ Indeed, we must relinquish everything so that we might truly inhabit the rest of the liturgy. After all, preaching is not the only thing that constitutes worship. Apart from those few ultra-Reformed Christians, who see the sermon as the only good reason for gathering the saints, there are hymns to sing, confessions to make, intercessions to pray, bread to be broken and offerings to give. By being present to these also and not just the sermon, and maybe even according them the same amount of time, it may well be that the sermon ends up more powerful not less, because instead of being detached from the liturgy it now derives power and legitimacy from it.

Preaching as Theater

I guess for those who have not grown up in churches with a preaching tradition, all of the above confirms their worst fears about preaching: namely, that it is overly dramatic. But that is the point. For all our fears of performance, and for all our disdain for mere pulpitering, that is what preaching is, or should be: pure theater. Preaching is not simply a talk, or a lecture, but an event, utterly unique and unrepeatable. It is the unique coming together of congregation, preacher, and Holy Spirit, so that on *this* day, in *this* actual place, we might hear the gospel summons again. The word is the deed. Anything less than this, and I want my money back. Those who complain that they didn't get anything out of the sermon, or that they cannot remember after five minutes what the sermon was about, miss the point. We don't learn anything much in the sermon. We save learning for the catechetical processes of the church. Rather in preaching we expose our congregations to the great drama of salvation, hoping that somewhere in the retelling, our congregations will live for another week. "Tell me the old, old story lest I forget so soon."¹⁹

18. Capon, *The Foolishness of Preaching*, 26.

19. I love what Richard Lischer says about this. We need not worry about people remembering our sermons, he says, "for the words are needed only as long as it takes

No wonder our notes seem unusable after the event. In fact, as I look over my old sermons, I wonder how on earth I managed to inspire anyone with them. They look so paltry; because actually, they were conceived in the vortex of a moment utterly unique in the journey of this one congregation. I may try to use them again; there are some that live in other contexts. But at their best, the scribbled dog-eared notes in my draw are testimony, as the old preacher muses in Marilynne Robinson's stunning novel *Gilead*, to a passionate love that is now spent.²⁰

From what I have said earlier about preparation, one may infer that I think we need to be increasingly wary of illustrations. Whole books are devoted to illustrations for this or that theme, many of which are powerful and useful. But the danger of an illustration is that it can so easily obscure or substitute for the Bible's own vivid imagery. And then what happens is that the congregation lauds the preacher's humor, or even his family, without ever inhabiting the world of the Bible. Instead of books of jokes, illustrations, we should in preaching plunder the imagery we have been given, working as much to bring our listeners into the world of the Scripture, as bringing the world of Scripture to our listeners.²¹ Who needs illustrations to embellish the story of the prodigal son, so-called? The narrative is replete with images—an old man running, a disheveled son, an angry brother—each one capable of carrying a whole sermon in itself.²² To illustrate other than from the story itself is not only unnecessary but unbelieving, for by so doing the preacher betrays a distinct lack of trust in the ability of the Bible to carve out its own hearing. Yes, there is the work of contextualization. Every generation must read the words of Scripture afresh in its own language. I have found Brueggemann's homiletical anachronisms very helpful here: a quick and often humorous way

for them to form Christ in the hearers." Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching*, 79.

20. Robinson, *Gilead*, 46: "There's not a word in any of those sermons I didn't mean when I wrote it."

21. Note the work of George Lindbeck in this regard: Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*. A great deal of preaching conforms in my opinion to what Lindbeck describes as the *Experiential-Expressive* model of religion, where the listener is king. However, instead of trying to get something *out of* Scripture, our task as preachers ought to be that of immersing our congregations *in* the world of Scripture. Lindbeck would describe this as a *Cultural-Linguistic* alternative.

22. See Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and through Peasant Eyes*, 158–206, as evidence of the dexterity of the narrative. I plundered heavily from this book in my very earliest days of preaching and was repeatedly overwhelmed by the way Bailey brings out the richness and artistry of the narrative.

of connecting up the world of the Bible with our world. But the point about his anachronisms, and the point of good contextualization, is that it pays respect to the power of scriptural imagery to deliver Christ to the congregation. In fact, as Craig Barnes points out, “the Bible has very few illustrations. But it is filled with powerful images. When the first psalm claims that those who delight in the law of the Lord are like trees planted by streams of water, it is providing not an illustration but an image. A preacher can spend the whole sermon on this text, peeling this image like an onion, and never make it to the eternal core.”²³

What I am trying to argue is this: the strangeness and inaccessibility of Scripture is no excuse to abandon the text. That the congregation doesn't get it first time around should not dissuade us from doing it again. It may well be that they have just encountered something bigger than themselves. In fact, whereas I used to feel a failure when someone didn't understand what I was on about, these days I take it as a sign of hope: there is more here than meets the eye, more than can possibly be shown on powerpoint with neatly arranged points. Actually, there is a growing consensus among preachers (not to mention a similar consensus in the business community about the use of screens), that for preaching to be truly preaching powerpoint needs to be abandoned. It just doesn't do justice to what preaching is. Preaching is an *oral* event. For all the complaints of educationalists who talk about different learning styles, preaching is *sui generis*. For preaching to be truly preaching, the preacher must be unfettered by the fear of the congregation and delight simply in doing the text. This is our sole authority. Instead of flying off to either side of the pulpit, thus betraying our disdain for the text, we would better serve our congregations if we stayed put, preaching through the text, not around it. The text is our only authority. Having immersed ourselves in it for most of the week, we would do well to hide behind it in the pulpit. I know one pastor who from time to time would turn on his congregation in the middle of a sermon and say to those taking notes, with some sternness it might be added, to put their pens down. “Just listen,” he would say. “Listen to the words.” In a culture where the word has been systematically humiliated, to use Jacques Ellul's term, this is a brave step.²⁴ It is not every preacher who can do this. I imagine most of us would take it as a compliment if someone in our congregation took notes from our

23. Barnes, *Pastor as Minor Poet*, 130.

24. Ellul, *Humiliation of the Word*.

sermon. We would conclude that they were taking the word seriously. On the contrary, argues Peterson, preaching is an audio event. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.

Post-Text Blues

And so we come to the most challenging part of the sermon: the aftermath. If preaching can be likened to a birth, then not only is there conception, gestation, labor, and birth, but also the possibility of post-natal depression. I don't know a preacher in all of Christendom who doesn't suffer from it. In fact, on more than one occasion I have come away from church determined in my heart that I am never going to do this thing called preaching ever again. Not only does it seem the most ridiculous arrogance to stand in front of an audience and talk monologue for thirty or forty minutes, it is also a lot of work for seemingly little return.

But it is just here, precisely at this point of utter dejection about what we preachers do, that faith must be exercised: faith not in our abilities as communicators, nor in our exegetical competence—for it is often these things that we doubt—but faith in the Holy Spirit to take what we have just offered and work it by ways only he knows into the hearts of our congregation. After all, the whole project that we call preaching is from start to finish, from conception to delivery, a work of the Holy Spirit. As Lesslie Newbigin points out, the Holy Spirit is not there to assist, but rather the one who co-opted us from the very beginning of our task, to bear witness.²⁵ And so it makes sense, at this most vulnerable point that the preacher arrives at, immediately after the sermon, to relinquish control once again, trusting what Jesus said that “the wind blows where it wills.”

What this means, of course, is that we can never really second-guess what God is up to. Those sermons of ours that even we think were better than average often elicit nothing more than a conversation in the coffee lounge after the service about the weather; whereas those sermons that even we the preacher did not understand, are the very same messages that seem to inspire life transforming decisions. Indeed, I can vividly

25. Newbigin, *Light Has Come*, 208: “It is in this sense that the disciples will be witnesses . . . Their life, their words, their deeds, their sufferings will thus be the occasion, the place, where the mighty Spirit bears his own witness in the hearts and consciences of men and women so that they are brought to look again at the hated, rejected, humiliated, crucified man and confess ‘Jesus is Lord.’”

recall sitting in my study one Tuesday morning, lamenting last Sunday's sermon and wondering if I could go through it all once again, when I heard a light knock at the door. "About Sunday's sermon," said the person whose head peered round the door. "You have no idea what how powerful it was. God really spoke to me." At which point, we need to stop worrying about what impact we are making with our sermons, do as best we can in working the text, and simply trust that the Holy Spirit can adopt our most fallible words and let Christ move among the congregation.

SAMPLE