

Preaching and Eschatology: Opening a New World in Preaching

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The most powerful preaching of the church is eschatological. It rests on the conviction that God is not yet finished with the world. It creates the expectation of the new world of God's promised future and empowers congregations to live imaginatively and hopefully toward the coming eschaton. It proclaims the good *news* of the gospel. It fosters an imagination for a new day, a new heaven, and a new earth. It refuses to accept what is as all that will be. It longs for things to be other than they are. It boldly imagines the coming of a day when children will not die, cities will not be filled with lonely people, peace will be more than the delicate balance of nuclear powers.

Much of contemporary preaching has assumed that God is finished with the world. It has assumed that what you see is what you get. What remains to be done is to uncover the currently available resources for living in the world. When preaching assumes that what you see is what you get, it has lost its imagination for a new world and is circumscribed in the closed circle of extant reality. It is unable to transcend what is already present. It approaches the "room" of modern life and offers strategies for rearrangement of the furniture. Truly powerful preaching does not show us the same old room newly arranged—it opens the door to a whole new room. It opens the new world of the eschaton.

To meet the challenge of opening a new world through preaching it is first necessary to liberate our imagination. The contemporary imagination is held captive in the closed circle of extant reality. The belief that all that is, is all that will be is so widely held that it is nearly impossible to imagine anything other than what is. There is no doubt, of course, that things do and will change. The lessons of a century of rapid change have been well learned. But the possibilities of change seem hopelessly limited by the human capacity to discover new elements in or new arrangements of the already existing world. The horizon of a radically new world eludes us.

For preaching, the cost of a captive imagination is great. Unable to imagine a future distinct from either the past or the present, contemporary preaching proclaims a good news that is something short of news. The news that is the good news of the gospel is not warmed-over solutions to age-old problems. Rather, it is *news*—news of God's promised future.

Only in the wildest dreams can the dawning of a new day be seen. Yet, without wild dreams of a new day and a vivid imagination of a world transformed, preaching fails its most central task—proclaiming good news. The promise of eschatological preaching is to foster such an imagination.

I. Fear of Quietism Helps Hold Preaching Captive to Extant Reality

Eschatology has a bad name in preaching. Appropriately concerned about the ethical implications of Christian faith, preaching often shies away from talk of the eschaton and focuses on the demands of today. The fear is that talk of the eschaton will lead to otherworldly concerns, divorced from the realities and exigencies of this world. Focus on the eschaton, the coming reign of God, may result in abdicating responsibility for the present. It is thought that too much talk of God's power for the future will result in abandonment of human action in the present. In short, there is a fear that eschatology leads to quietism.

Quietism is rightly feared. Preaching that lulls us into acceptance of the way things are or naively counsels us to sit back while God fixes the problems, is to be vigorously refuted. However, refuting quietistic preaching does not necessitate eliminating God's power for the future. It is not necessary to reduce God's power in order to increase our responsibility. Preaching that creates expectation of the eschaton does not lead to quietism in the present, but releases the transforming power of preaching.

Ironically, it is a fear of quietism that most often keeps contemporary preaching from realizing its full power and inhibits the transforming power of preaching. The irony is that preoccupation with the ethical demands of the present feeds despair, and from despair it is a very short step to quietism. Far too often preachers look out over broken and troubled congregations in a broken and troubled world and make such innane suggestions as: "We must be more loving," "We should stop hating each other," or "Jesus wants us to see the interconnectedness between us." Statements such as these are as true as they are obvious. At best their use is limited to the power of reminder—that is, they have only the capacity to remind us of the path we are on. They may help us keep from straying too far afield, but they offer no real possibility of transformation. At worst such statements add to our swelling burden of guilt: We are to do something we are not currently doing with what is currently available.

Congregations told over and over what they are to do about a troubled world will soon despair of their own ability to act. Despite their best intentions to make a difference in the present, they will soon discover their impotence to do so. When despair sets in, quietism and escapism take over.

Sermons that "rearrange the furniture" by telling congregations what they are to do in the present and how they are to live, no matter how stylishly crafted, move from the presumption that the situation of the world is our fault—either by our action or our inaction. Undoubtedly the world would be a better place if we acted less harmfully and more helpfully. But is it true that the abundant problems of the world rest solely at the feet of our activity or inactivity? As Walter Brueggemann has said:

[T]he liturgical tradition is overly preoccupied with guilt when in fact honesty about the world leads to a recognition that there is more pain, rage and grief in the world than has been generated by our guilt.¹

Put another way, the problem of theodicy cannot be resolved by improving human activity. The extent of evil exceeds the currently present means of eradicating it. If we have the sort of honesty that Brueggemann suggests, we are led to the conclusion that the currently available solutions for the world's problems will be exhausted before the world's problems are eradicated.

If preaching simply "rearranges the furniture," it operates on the erroneous premise "that will is the obedient servant of reason . . . hence, once the preacher convinces the hearers of the 'reasonable way,' the hearer's willpower automatically sets out to lead the hearer along that way."² The difficulty with this premise is that it has the power to enlighten a congregation, but lacks the power to transform it. One does not act differently simply because one knows a better way to act. It is as if the preacher told a depressed person to stop being depressed because he or she would feel better. Undoubtedly a depressed person would feel better if he or she would stop being depressed; even in the depths of depression one knows this. It is not a problem of knowledge, but a problem of capacity. The Pauline confession captures the dilemma: "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Romans 7:19). Possessing right knowledge is not enough. One's ability to act differently is not a function of knowing how to act, but of living in a different world, with new possibilities.

Opening a different world with new possibilities is the greatest challenge for preaching. Such a challenge is incumbent upon us because, as Karl Barth so aptly noted, people come to church, "consciously or unconsciously [leaving] behind them cherry tree, symphony, state, daily work, and other things, as possibilities somehow exhausted."³ That is, as much as any other time, and perhaps more so, the contemporary person consciously or unconsciously knows that the possibilities of transformation currently available to us are inadequate.

II. Uncover: The Underlying Metaphor for Preaching's Revelatory Function

A. Participating in Revelation through Biblical Explication

In part, the failure of preaching to transcend the closed circle of extant reality may be the result of unexamined assumptions about the function of preaching. In our time the most prevalent assumption is that preaching involves an explication of a portion of the Bible. The Bible has become the foundation of preaching. Perhaps more than any other time in the history of preaching, preachers consistently try to preach faithfully from the Bible. The broad usage of the Common Lectionary and the ready availability of resources interpreting biblical texts for preaching are but two indications that preachers are serious about preaching from the Bible.

That preaching is to be founded on the Bible rests on two prior assumptions. The first is that the Bible is revelatory. The second is that preaching properly conceived is also revelatory. Preaching explicates the Bible in order to exploit its revelatory power. It is assumed, therefore, that the principal

function of preaching is to participate in revelation through an explication of a portion of the Bible.

Although there is a fairly broad acceptance of the function of preaching as participating in revelation of God, there is little discussion of the operative understanding of revelation. If preaching is related to revelation, clarity about revelation should clarify the function of preaching. That is, if preaching reveals, the question of what it reveals begs to be answered. Furthermore, the role and status of the Bible is widely disputed. Unless there is clarity about the authority of the Bible, clarity about the function of biblical preaching is impossible.

B. Preaching as Revelation of What Is

There is a broad range of theological options for understanding revelation. In fact, the great theological debates of the last two centuries have largely concerned what it is that is revealed. For modern theology three understandings of revelation have predominated. The first holds that revelation reveals the immediate experience of the divine.⁴ The second holds that revelation reveals God as God is.⁵ The third holds that revelation reveals authentic human existence.⁶ Although there are vast differences among these perspectives, they share a common metaphor for the function of revelation—the metaphor “uncover.” Revelation “uncovers” something that until its appearance was hidden. Whether the experience of God, God in God’s self, or authentic human existence, that which was once and is again and again hidden is uncovered in revelation.⁷

Since preaching has often been understood as part and parcel of revelation, theories of preaching have also shared the “uncover” metaphor, so that, at least in part, what one does in preaching is uncover something. In this metaphor preaching encounters its first difficulty in transcending extant reality. If preaching uncovers, there must be something already present that is in need of uncovering. That is, revelation, and preaching as a part of revelation, uncovers something that is already there. There is no need to transcend extant reality; there is only the need to uncover a hidden aspect of an already existent reality. In the theologies mentioned above, the hidden aspect in need of uncovering is either an experience of God, God as God is, or authentic human existence.

The question to be raised, however, is whether the uncovering of this hidden aspect will really make any difference. Will uncovering a hidden experience of God, a hidden aspect of God, or a hidden aspect of human existence change the possibilities that lie before us? Don’t such uncoverings of things hidden only increase our knowledge and not our capacity to change? If we are to change, if the problems of our world are to be addressed, we need more than an increase in our knowledge of what is already present. We need an imagination for what is not yet, but will be.

C. Biblical Preaching Cannot Merely Uncover What Is

Another difficulty preaching encounters in transcending extant reality arises from the biblical approach associated with theologies that understand revelation as “uncover.” These theologies turn to the Bible as a locus of divine revelation. The Bible is the authoritative source of revelation’s uncovering. The truth of the Bible is to be found in its correspondence to the reality that it uncovers. The authority of the Bible is located and affirmed in its disclosure of a uniquely revelatory realm. The Bible is authoritative only in the realms associated with what is uncovered in revelation. Modern theologians have shunned claims to the Bible’s authority in realms beyond those associated with revelation.⁸ However, in the realms properly associated with revelation, the Bible is an authority without peer. As such, the relationship between the Bible and revelation is one of exemplar and activity. The Bible is the exemplary model for the sort of uncovering that revelation is.

If the Bible is the exemplary model of the sort of uncovering that revelation is, then preaching is well-advised, if not mandated, to expound on the Bible or a portion of the Bible. Since the Bible uncovers, preaching seeks to discern what is uncovered in the Bible and do likewise. The operative hermeneutic is as follows: the Bible uncovers something that is true once and for all; the preacher, through whatever methods are appropriate for the sort of truth that is uncovered, discerns the truth uncovered in the text and makes plain this truth in the present setting.

The problem with this approach to the Bible and the resultant hermeneutic is that it presumes a correspondence between a truth in the Bible and a truth in the present setting. It presumes that there is an enduring truth about the way things are from which we may profit. The preacher who follows this hermeneutic need only apply the enduring truth of the Bible to the present.

Sometimes the enduring truth uncovered is of a moral sort. Presuming a moral superiority to be found in the Bible that will benefit us in the present, the preaching applies this truth. Often this sort of preaching takes the form of a syllogism. The major premise of the syllogism is the abiding truth uncovered by the biblical text; the minor premise is taken from the contemporary setting; and the conclusion is the “lesson” for the day. For example, in Deuteronomy 10:19 the text says: “Love the stranger therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.” The syllogism runs like this:

Major premise: We are to love strangers.

Minor premise: “Boat people” are strangers.

Conclusion: Therefore, we are to love boat people.

Although the syllogistic logic of this style of preaching is sound and the argument of the sermon is persuasive, does the presentation of this truth empower a congregation to act any differently? Is the congregation not given just one more demand without any new means of meeting it?

Sometimes the enduring truth is of a spiritual sort. Presuming a spiritual superiority revealed in the Bible that will profit us in the present, the sermon applies it. For example, in Mark 14:36 Jesus goes into the garden called Gethsemane and says: “Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what thou wilt.” The enduring truth is

intimacy with the divine. The means to this intimacy is found in self-relinquishment. The preaching is completed by locating comparable ways of reenacting such an experience in the contemporary setting, by locating occasions for self-relinquishment. Again, although it may be true that self-relinquishment is to be desired, has the sermon empowered the congregation to do so? Are we not again given one more demand, one more reason for feeling guilty?

The metaphor uncover as a means of understanding revelation in the Bible and in preaching is flawed. It assumes a correspondence to truth between what is revealed and what is. As Jürgen Moltmann argues no such correspondence exists yet. He says: "[T]he cross of Jesus suggests that God and reality are analogies which do not yet exist."⁹ The God revealed in the Bible does not uncover God's present glory, but promises God's future glory. The Bible speaks not so much of what is, but of what is to come. The world that the biblical texts refer to is a world that does not yet exist, a world that is on the horizon of history.

An honest look at extant reality shows not only the wonders of creation, but also the abundant suffering of creation; not only the human capacity to do good, but the human capacity to do evil. When preaching seeks to uncover some enduring truth from the Bible and turn it to contemporary use, it fails to recognize the full truth of the world that is. Extant reality, the world that is, is marred by the problems of sin, suffering, and death. As long as this is true of what is, no strategy for human responsibility will overcome the recurrence of despair.

III. Revelation that Opens the New World of the Eschaton

Jürgen Moltmann questions the appropriateness of the metaphor "uncover" for revelation. In his essay, "The Revelation of God and the Question of Truth,"¹⁰ he offers a critique of the prevailing theologies of revelation arguing that they have assumed an extant reality that is uncovered in revelation. Over against theologies that understand revelation as an uncovering of an already existent reality, Moltmann sees revelation as a promise of a radically new reality, the radically new reality of the eschaton. He has tried to understand revelation not as an uncovering of something hidden, but as opening to something altogether new. He writes:

Christian revelation does not introduce something which was already there independent of it, something which was always beginning or is eternal. Rather, it makes present that which does not yet exist. It presents the future, and calls that which does not exist into existence.¹¹

For Moltmann the truth of revelation is an open truth, that is, it has not yet been realized. As long as there is still suffering and death, the truth of revelation is outstanding. The truth of a promise is not realized until the promise is fulfilled. The truth of revelation, when it is understood as promise, remains open until the promise is fulfilled. This does not mean that revelation is untrue—it means that its truth is not yet fully realized; it does not yet have

a reality to which it corresponds. Although there is no already existing reality to which the biblical texts correspond, there is the promised reality of the eschaton. Moltmann holds that revelation corresponds to the eschaton, which, lying in the future, does not yet exist. Thus for him the question to be addressed is not: "Where and when does an epiphany of the divine, eternal, immutable and primordial take place in the realm of the human, temporal and transient?"¹² It is: "When and where does the God of the promise reveal his faithfulness and in it himself and his presence?" The difference between the question asked by the prevailing theologies of revelation and the one asked by Moltmann is that "the one question asks about the presence of the eternal, the other about the future of what is promised."¹³

Moltmann establishes a connection between the biblical text and the contemporary setting through a shared future.¹⁴ The eschaton, because it has not yet come, is a future reality for both the biblical texts and the contemporary congregation. The text's future and the congregation's future can thus become the common ground between two divergent worlds.

In rejecting the metaphor of uncover for the understanding of revelation, Moltmann's perspective breaks open the closed circle of extant reality and opens to a wholly new reality. In this approach the function of preaching is the formation of communities that expect the future of the eschaton. Preaching does not uncover something hidden in the present, but creates the expectation of the new in God's promised future and opens to the new world of the eschaton.

Understood in this way, preaching has a creative function, in the sense that it creates expectation through the proclamation of good news—the newness promised in the eschaton. Moltmann says as much himself:

The process and procedure of the Christian proclamation is the calling of the heathen, the justification of the godless, the rebirth to a living hope. This is a creative event happening to what is vain, forsaken, lost, godless and death. It can therefore be designated as a *nova creatio ex nihilo*, whose continuity lies solely in the guaranteed faithfulness of God.¹⁵

IV. Opening a New World Through Preaching: Promise and Biblical Authority

When preaching understands itself to reveal by uncovering, it limits itself to uncovering what is somehow already there and its strategies for addressing problems are likewise limited to what is currently available. The result is an inability to proclaim anything radically new. In contrast, powerful and faithful preaching proclaims the radically new news of the gospel. It opens a new world.

Concretely this means that preaching must discern and proclaim what it is that God promises *and* discern and proclaim when and where God is faithful to God's promises. Both of these things are necessary if the future opened in preaching is to be a credible one. In order to live hopefully toward a promised future, it is not necessary that this future be

fully present. It is necessary, however, that the faithfulness of the promise maker be established, that the God who makes the promises is reliable and capable of fulfilling the promises. In order to discern these things preaching turns to the Bible.

The Bible narrates and interprets the events in the life of Israel and the church, the story of Israel's history and the history of Jesus, but it does so in light of the future opened by these events and their interpretation. It is not that the Bible is the exemplary model of the sort of activity that revelation is. It is rather that the Bible is the normative account of the life and future of Jesus.

The texts of the Bible represent Israel's and the church's history of struggle to discern God's promised future and to discern God's faithfulness to God's promises. The future opened in these texts is not a uniform or consistent future; it is indeed a struggle. The canon is cacophonous; there are many and differing voices about the shape of the future within the Bible. Nevertheless, because the church, in as much as it is the Christian church, confesses that its life and future are tied to the life and future of Jesus, it is bound to the texts of the Bible. It is through these texts that the church has access to a normative account of Jesus' life and his future.

If one understands revelation as opening the future of God's promises, then the issue of the authority of the Bible is recast. The Bible is revelatory not because of any special competence it has in accurately disclosing what is, be that experience of the divine, God as God is, or authentic human existence. Instead the Bible is revelatory through its creative function for Israel and the early church in anticipating God's promised future with the world. The Bible is authoritative for the church and its preaching because it provides the normative basis for discerning God's faithfulness to God's promised future. The operative hermeneutic for preaching is as follows: The texts of the Bible represent the history of the struggle of their communities to discern God's promise for their future; the preacher, similarly struggling to discern God's promises for the future of his/her community, seeks to discern the future opened by the biblical texts and to the extent to which that future is shared, proclaim it for the congregation gathered.

Following this hermeneutic, preaching asks what God promises to us, what it is that we may hope for. As it asks this question it seeks to discern what God has done and what God is doing now, for in these things it discerns the signs of God's faithfulness to God's promises. In the signs of God's faithfulness it does not yet find God's triumph, but the assurances of God's power for the future. When preaching does this it makes it possible to imagine a new world, the new world of the eschaton. The world of the eschaton is not an imaginary world, but a world imagined. It is not a flight of fantasy, but a horizon of hope toward which we may live.¹⁶

Enlivening the world of the eschaton in the imagination of a congregation does not lead to quietism. It fosters hope and not despair: it makes it possible for congregations to long for the dawning of a new day,

honestly to suffer its absence, to laugh and celebrate at the present signs of God's faithfulness, to rage and struggle against the persistence of the old day, and to pray fervently for God's coming in power.

Conclusion

Preaching opens the new world of God's promised future. It empowers congregations actively to engage the present by fostering a hopeful imagination of the new future opened by the gospel. The shape of this future emerges from the struggle to discern what God has promised and when and where God has been faithful to God's promises. Preaching is bound to the witness of the Bible as it engages in the struggle over the shape of the future opened by the gospel. In hope it creates within the congregation gathered anticipation for the dawning of a new day.

NOTES

¹ Walter Brueggemann, "Newness Mediated By Worship," *Reformed Liturgy and Music* 20 (Spring 1986).

² Don Wardlaw, *Preaching Biblically: Creating Sermons in the Shape of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), pp. 14-15. Wardlaw makes this statement in reference to the sermonic style of argumentation characteristic of John Broadus.

³ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1978), p. 107.

⁴ This perspective is best exemplified by Friedrich Schleiermacher.

⁵ This perspective is best exemplified by Karl Barth.

⁶ This perspective is best exemplified by Rudolf Bultmann.

⁷ See Karl Barth, "The Christian Understanding of Revelation," in *Against the Stream: Shorter Post-War Writings 1946-1952*, trans. and ed. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954), pp. 205-240. Here Barth says: "Revelation in the Christian sense means the unveiling of certain facts that are fundamentally hidden, things no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no human heart conceived" p. 207. See also, Rudolf Bultmann, "In general, we understand by revelation the disclosure of what is veiled, the opening up of what is hidden." *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, trans. and ed. Schubert Ogden (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1961), p. 59. See, Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Speeches*, p. 89. "What is revelation? Every original and new communication of the Universe to man is a revelation. . . . Every intuition and every original feeling proceeds from revelation. As revelation lies beyond consciousness, demonstration is not possible." Schleiermacher sees revelation as the uncovering for consciousness what is hidden from consciousness.

⁸ For example, few would look to the Bible for accurate descriptions of physics, surgery, or geography, despite references to these that may be found in the Bible.

⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *Hope and Planning*, trans. Margaret Clarkson (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 16.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 3-30. Moltmann's critique of theologies of revelation explicitly addresses Barth, Bultmann, and Pannenberg. Although he does not address Schleiermacher's understanding of revelation the criticism still applies, because Schleiermacher too assumes an extant reality that finds its correspondence in the Bible. in revelation.

¹¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. James W. Leitch (London: SCM Press, 1967), p. 43.

¹² Moltmann, *Hope and Planning*, p. 25.

¹³ Moltmann, *Hope and Planning*, p. 15. Moltmann believes that when theology has sought an existing reality as the referent for the biblical text, it has imported the God

concept of Parmenides, which is foreign to the texts of the Bible. In *Theology of Hope*, he contrasts the concept of a God who is, deriving from Parmenides, with what he considers a biblical understanding of God who is coming. Parmenides contends that “the unity that is being never was, never will be, for now it is all at once as a whole.” For Moltmann the simultaneity of the present moment implicit in Parmenides lies behind the “epiphany of the eternal presence of being.” The “epiphany of the eternal presence of being” is contrasted with the “apocalypse of the promised future.” For a discussion of the importance of this contrast see: Christopher Morse, *The Logic of Promise in Moltmann’s Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), pp. 31ff.

¹⁴ Moltmann writes: “What unites our present age with past ages in history is. . . the problem of the future.” *Theology of Hope*, p. 189.

¹⁵ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, p. 302.

¹⁶ On the relationship between hope and imagination see Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).