

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Preaching as a Resource for Preachers

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I.

Every year we hear the voice on the crackly tape cry, "I have a dream," and preachers sigh and wish that they could preach like that. Yet the man who once said, "In the quiet recesses of my heart, I am fundamentally a clergyman, a Baptist preacher," is rarely studied in homiletics classes or given scholarly consideration by homileticians. Although he continues to inspire imitation among young African-American preachers, the preacher, Martin Luther King, Jr., has pretty much been relegated to the realm of historical research.¹

Perhaps this is because King's peculiar talent and the even more peculiar historical moment that summoned it cannot be duplicated. The further we get from the turbulent 1960s the more outrageously unrepeatable they appear. The epoch-defining causes of the sixties that mobilized King's passionate eloquence have given way to a new set of less-definable concerns. Today's social ills are more likely to be dealt with by piecemeal economic engineering than by public demonstrations, moral crusades, or biblical oratory. This is true the world over. If Tony Blair walked into the House of Commons and promised blood, sweat, toil, and tears, there would be polite tittering from the back benches. Likewise, if the most famous of King's "sermons," "I Have a Dream," was preached by a new leader in the techno-reliant atmosphere of the new millennium, it might evoke a very different response: 'We don't want dreams. We want computer training and economic parity.'

Although King continues to inspire preachers, his actual homiletical practices did not resemble current theories of preaching, at least the ones practiced in communities with which I am most familiar: middle-class, largely-white, Protestant churches.

For example, King was not much of a story teller or humorist in the pulpit. He had a few stock stories and one or two jokes which he inserted into many of his sermons, but he was in no sense a narrative preacher, preferring instead to organize his sermons around a few universal themes. The themes, such as the destiny of 'man,' the importance of love, or the greatness of God, appeared in his sermons throughout his career. He developed these *topoi* (conventional "places" or repositories for arguments) differently as he grew older and the fortunes of the Movement changed.

In a deeper sense, however, King was a profoundly narrative preacher. The story of the Exodus underlay and informed nearly everything he said on the subject of race, freedom, and justice. Even when he did not cite the Exodus- event explicitly, his sermons were marked by an emotional and rhetorical *breaking through* from suffering, anger, and struggle to freedom and joy. One can not listen to a King sermon and miss the exaltation of *release*.

When it came to humor, King didn't exclude it from his sermons because he was a humorless person. On the contrary, intimates recall how thoroughly at home he was in the back-slapping, fraternity-culture of preachers, in the guarded privacy of which he kept his friends in stitches with jokes and impressions of his fellow preachers.

In the pulpit, however, he never settled for humor's payoff, which is basically ironic: the pleasurable recognition of a discrepancy. The aims of humor roughly correspond to ancient rhetoric's goal of delighting an audience. King's oratory was no stranger to delight, but he always strove for rhetoric's higher goal, which is to *move* the listener to a profound change of heart and behavior.

Unlike contemporary preachers, King rarely talked about himself or bared his soul in the pulpit. When he did include a reference to himself, it was always as a part of a larger story in which he figured as an observer or minor player. With the exception of his late sermons in which he appears to have been suffering from depression, the point of his first-person references was never to share his feelings with an audience or to disclose what sort of person he was. Of necessity he did speak of himself but almost always from behind a public persona of great dignity and reserve. He knew his experiences were ingredients in the history of the Movement but not essential to it.

In place of personal opinions, impressions, and self-revelations, King offered arguments on behalf of freedom. These he abstracted from Christian doctrines and biblical texts as well as from non-Christian sources such as the Declaration of Independence. Although he spoke from the heart of a specific church, or perhaps *because* he did so, he felt free, especially in the early years of the struggle, to presuppose a broad partnership of Christian truths and civic aspirations. King's own liberal practice of civic religion infused his sermons with a universality and a generous love of humanity that is foreign to much of contemporary preaching.

Although King was a creature of the media of his day, he spoke in an era that had not yet reduced oratory to cyber-town meetings, soundbites, or lip-biting sincerity. Like most speakers, he understood the need for identification with his audience, and, indeed, no one could create empathy with audiences as King did. But he was also the product of a rhetorical tradition that stressed the intellectual and moral *difference* between speaker and audience. He therefore didn't bother with the conversational approach to preaching but fully invested himself in the risky, all-or-nothing style of oratory in which the preacher soars higher and higher toward the sun and dares his hearers to come along. In the best of his sermons, he and his listeners burnt up the church. If his hearers were not bold enough to go with him, that was their problem. It is not the prophet's job to hold back.

A final difference between King and many contemporary preachers has to do with his method of interpreting the Bible. Early in his ministry he abandoned the historical-critical theories he had learned in seminary and reverted to the older techniques of typology and allegory, not because he was particularly interested in a christocentric reading of the Old Testament, but because allegory allowed his hearers a greater opportunity to identify their struggles with those portrayed in the Bible. Like a man in a black hat and silk cape, he discovered civil rights on the Jericho Road and the despair of Vietnam in the Far Country. He did not subscribe to the typical Enlightenment step *back* from the Bible in order to assess its historical reliability; rather, he followed the Negro church's practice of stepping *into* the Bible, where on its storied pages the church continues to find its own true life fully displayed. Ironically, King's Boston Ph.D. changed the modern world by reviving techniques of interpretation that scholars had already dismissed as antiquated.

II.

Given the several factors that distinguish King's preaching from our own, how does his example serve as a resource for contemporary preachers? It is not necessarily helpful to invoke the musical range of his voice, the vividness of his imagery, or even his prophetic courage and then to add, "Go and do likewise." There's more to it than that. Martin Luther King, Jr. is a resource to all who preach because he fully and unreservedly embraced God's word in its spoken form as his vocation and allowed it to shape his ministry in the world.

Some years ago, when I was doing research on King, I spent many afternoons at the King Center and other repositories, listening to cassette and unedited reel-to-reel tapes of church services in which King was the preacher. Although I never met him or saw him in person, I felt I had been to Ebenezer and worshipped with him many times. During the course of these sessions, several realizations about my own preaching, pallid as it is by comparison with his, began to dawn.

The first thing you pick up from the tapes is how bone-tired the man was. I am not referring to the affectedly ponderous beginning of many black sermons, but something real in the preacher. *Tired*. The listener can't help but wonder if he's going to get through to the end. Why does he force himself to preach, even at Ebenezer, where surely everyone would have understood if he took the day off?

King apparently subscribed to the theory that it is the preacher's job to show up on Sunday morning, no matter what. A Pentecostal colleague once told me that he only preaches when the Spirit moves him to do so. I said that if I followed that rule, I wouldn't preach very often. And neither would have King.

He stood up to preach after all-night negotiating sessions, bombings, and the kinds of problems that would lead many of us to phone in the Sunday sermon. He did so doggedly out of duty, perhaps, as he kept on keeping on, but he also stuck with it because the act of interpreting the Bible and expounding it to a congregation never failed to revive his spirit and sustain him in his ministry. He began his career with the preacher's stigmatic belief in the power of the word of God to melt hearts of stone. That world will either redeem the soul of America or damn it to hell, just as it did on a smaller scale every Sunday in his father's church. Even when he began to doubt that the word was going to work its black-church magic on American society, he never doubted it would work for *him*. What he once said of marching (at a low point in Chicago) he might have said of preaching:

Yes, I'm tired of going to jail;
I'm tired of all the surging murmur
of life's restless sea,
But I'll tell anybody,
I'm willing to stop marching.
I don't march 'cause I like it;
I march because I must
And because I'm a man
And because I'm a child of God.²

Preachers may disagree with one another in matters of theological emphasis, but none of us should underestimate the health available to those who routinely, like ancient

navigators, read the Bible and chart the coordinates between Scripture, church, soul, and world.

That King persisted in preaching and saved his own soul in the doing of it, was my first discovery. The second was how high and beautiful an art he pursued, even when he was away from the public glare speaking to his own congregation in Atlanta. One would imagine that familiarity with one's audience breeds laziness or dereliction of poetic duty but not so for King. He knew how to follow the curve of a religious idea as it takes possession of a congregation, and he did so with joy Sunday after Sunday.

The poet possesses the gift of seeing one thing in terms of another or of uncovering hidden realities beneath the squalor of everyday life. This faculty was the truest mark of King's genius as a preacher and a prophet. He discerned the transformation of history taking place in, of all places, Montgomery, Alabama, and saw, really *saw*, the dignity of the human race in striking sanitation workers in Memphis. He invoked "the iron feet of oppression," "the Pharaohs of the South," "gigantic buildings [that] kiss the skies," "sunlit paths of inner peace," and, of course, "the Dream" for his congregations because, unlike so many talented preachers, he understood the linkage between prophetic vision and the pastoral care of oppressed people. Metaphoric language does not merely decorate some of our better ideas; it is fundamental to God's manner of touching and changing human beings.

His sermons were therefore expressions and extensions of the life of actual communities. Today, many of our model preachers are writers, seminary professors, or free-lance religious personalities. They have much to teach us, but they can not offer the complete homiletical package because God designed the word to be the beating heart of real churches like Ebenezer Baptist, with street addresses, parking lots, and red-inked budgets.

The sermon does not elevate itself above the embarrassment of local attempts to practice the ordinary Christian virtues of hospitality, friendship, mercy, and justice. It participates in these practices and learns from them. In King's ministry the word even shaped itself to a messily political and sometimes disorganized struggle for human rights carried out by ambitious leaders and fallible human organizations. The preacher King taught us to ground the word in the suffering and joy of the community at hand. In this regard, perhaps it is helpful to think of the vivid language, examples, and narratives of our sermons not as *illustrations* of an abstract truth but as *extensions* of the biblical text into our churches and neighbors.

Finally, King was not afraid to claim this partnership with God and his people and to act upon it. He and his audiences performed the Scripture no less than an actor *does* Lear or a pianist vivifies a Brahms concerto. King's first inclination, born of many Sundays in black congregations, was to locate the word of God wherever people were responding verbally to the sermon. He later came to understand word-and-response as a dress rehearsal for the community's performance of the word in its daily life. To be word of God, the sermon must move people to new expressions of courage and discipleship. He altered his definition of preaching by subtly shifting the criterion of its authenticity from brilliance of effect to faithfulness of commitment. If the sermon is promoting the kinds of love and liberation that God sponsored in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and if it is opposing the kinds of injustice God has always hated, then we've got the word of God in our church.

The lessons of King's preaching for the next generation of preachers are not simple

or direct, but the notion of “performance” suggests several implications. Preachers can be so devoted to the analytic “step back” from the text or so desperate for illustrations of biblical concepts that they overlook the ancient techniques that enhance participation *in* the text. The big question is not What did the text mean? or What’s a good translation of sin? but What is God doing today?

Preaching-as-performance encourages the preacher to examine his or her own language to determine the extent to which it reflects the religious lecture-form rather than the riches of biblical expression. Every modality of language has its own beauty and therefore its own potential for expressing the joy of the gospel. Within the boundaries of the congregations’ own traditions, let the sermon boldly voice the liberative *mood* of the Exodus, the pathos or anger of prophecy, the vision of hope, or the vulnerability of love. King’s biblical preaching, though not so exegetically careful, always caught the voice of the text.

Performance is not some new technique for the already-burdened preacher to master, but a series of reliable perspectives—poetic, pastoral, hermeneutic—by which the Baptist preacher, Martin Luther King, Jr., continues to instruct and encourage a new generation of witnesses.

Notes

¹ Edited cassette tapes of some of King’s sermons are now available with the collection, *A Knock at Midnight*, edited by Clayborne Carson and Peter Holloran (New York: Warner Books, 1998).

² “Why I Must March,” Chicago, August 18, 1966 quoted and poetically arranged in Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Word that Moved America* (New York: Oxford, 1995), 264.