

“Suddenly from Heaven there Came a Sound”: Pentecostal Preaching at the End of the Twentieth Century

William H. Willimon

Duke University Chapel, Durham, North Carolina

“I don’t believe that Jesus was God, but I’m no theologian....The whole concept of the nature of God is broader and wider and more mysterious and more holy than could be expressed in Jesus.”

Bill Phipps, Moderator, the United Church of Canada ¹

Here, as we limp toward the end of probably the bloodiest century, it is still quite amazing that there are those, even within the United Church of Canada, who can still muster enthusiasm for an essentially nice but usually unconcerned “broad and wide” concept of a God. “We’ve got enough problems trying to live ethically and well here, to have any knowledge of what happens after we die,” says Moderator Phipps. The affluent, those located at the top, always speak of this as the best of all possible worlds.

Sorry. God as helpful moral metaphor, really isn’t worth knocking on the world’s door to proclaim. Why preach if we have nothing more to say to the world about God than that?

So what about the “nature of God”? If Jesus is not God, who is the God Jesus is not? So much scholarly energy has been expended, in this bloody century² worrying about *who* Jesus is. Here I would like to say just a word about *where* Jesus is. Postmodern thought has taught us that location is important. Where one is standing, social location, is deeply determinative of what one is thinking. The location of the interpreter determines interpretation. Where are we who interpret Jesus as God? Where is Jesus, the one who is interpreted?

Word From On High

Just before he left us he told us to wait in Jerusalem until we be clothed with power from on high (Acts 1:8). And then he went up (Acts 1:10).

Shortly thereafter we learned that he was leaving us, not to our own devices, but to the same power which empowered him, power from on high.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind,...All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak...as the Spirit gave them ability (Acts 2:1-2a, 4a).

Stanley Hauerwas and I, in our meditation on The Lord’s Prayer³ note that in prayer it makes some difference where Jesus is. If Jesus is safely tucked in our hearts, if God is merely a wish projection of the very best of human aspiration and experience (God as humanity in a very loud voice), forget it. These godlets are no match for the battle before us.

Because we pray to a Father who is located “in heaven,” we are bold to pray for

extravagant gifts like bread and peace, healing and hope, because God rules. Our God is located, has a realm, a kingdom, has staked out a territory. This accounts for why Christianity is so infused with politics. As we learned back at Christmas, our kingdoms are constantly being threatened by God's kingdom because God's rule is constantly expanding into enemy territory. What we call "evangelism" is heaven breaking out all over. God's rule intrudes into real places like Bethlehem, recaptures lost territory, commandeers lives like those of Mary and Joseph, goes head-to-head with would-be gods like Caesar (Luke 2:1-5).

Thus the creed speaks of Jesus as "seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty" and thus we pray "thy kingdom come, thy will be done."

A Jesus located, in heaven, at the right hand of God the Father, is counter to the way most of us would like to think of ourselves and God. As Alan Bloom says, *the peculiarly American religion is the notion that we and God are tight.*⁴ We like thinking of ourselves as persons who want to be close to God. We therefore devise a wonderfully "user friendly" God, an inclusive, readily accessible deity who is anything but weird.

Heaven is weird. Heaven is a warning against contemporary domestication of God. No one met by the God of Israel and the church ought to complain that here is only a pale image of ourselves and our best aspirations.⁵ This God doesn't live here, in our country, our churches. God rules from heaven, at some marked distance from here.

Years ago Bishop John A.T. Robinson ridiculed the notion of a heaven which is "up" as a silly primitive holdover, evidence of an immature failure to conceptualize in a sophisticated way. Presumably, the late bishop Robinson now knows that he was wrong. Heaven is not a metaphor, a state of mind. God is located. God is not some mushy, generalized, universal presence. God stands at some distance from creation, for God is Creator, not created. God is against us in order truly to be for us. God knows we need someone, at some higher location, to stand against us.

Barth saw only one use for theology – as servant of preaching. All theology is tested by its practice. However, when doing its work for the proclamation of the church, Barth said that theology "must keep in view that God is in heaven, but itself upon earth, that as compared with any human language and so even with that of the best dogmatics God, His revelation, and faith continue to live their own free life."⁶ I wonder if our trouble is that evangelical theology believes in resurrection, but we have not yet comprehended the homiletical significance of ascension. Theology which doesn't know where God is, which can muster no more than the intellectual cowardice of benign agnosticism ("The whole concept of God is broader and wider and more mysterious..." etc.) never can be free to say much of interest to preaching.

Word to the "Underworld"

In the best novel of this past year, Don DeLillo, portrays us down here. *Underworld*⁷ is a grim, more than slightly sinister American shadowland of industrial waste and graffiti-covered subway trains. Once there was faith in baseball. But now even that pure faith is merely business. The title says it all, *Underworld*. The protagonists are Nick Shay, a waste consultant, and Klara Sax, an artist in waste who paints abandoned military aircraft left to rot in the desert after the cold war. The novel switches back and forth from the Bronx to Phoenix and it is difficult to know which

place is a greater desert. There's J. Edgar Hoover in drag at Truman Capote's infamous *Black and White Ball* in 1966 and many not-so-subtle references to the number 13. In true postmodern fashion, little in this novel is easy to figure out and everything appears to have significance beyond our grasping and too much is told to fit into a comprehensible plot. "It's all about losing," says one of the characters toward the end.

Sound like chaos? Despite it all, there is a kind of plot in *Underworld*. "It's all linked," Hoover tells his goon, "The war protesters, the garbage thieves, the rock bands, the promiscuity, the drugs, the hair." We can't live without some pattern, some plan beneath the disconnections. Alas, down here, when there's no one but us to make the connections, no purpose or plan above our own devising, it's all rather dark. *Underworld*.

And so we are all gathered, huddled down here after much death and defeat. This is the way the world ends, not with a bang, but with folk cowering together, holding on to one another and talking about "community," and "interpersonal relationships" but in reality, separated by race and language and loss.

And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting....All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and they began to speak...(Acts 2:1-2, 4a).

Here is the heaven descended grace that first provoked our speech and continues to do so today. We speak because of some substantial one-way traffic between us and heaven. The One who has gone up, who is located "at the right hand of the God" (Acts 2:33) is also the Incarnate (Col. 3:1-3). He is tangible evidence that God the Creator will not leave his creation to its own devices. Having promised not to leave us desolate (John 14:18), he gives us the same power which enabled him so to speak. Pentecost is the foundation of homiletics.

Much is set against free speech. The Empire has certain officially sanctioned, rigorously policed modes of communication:

"You've got the whole world in your hands – Mastercard."

"The right to bear arms is the foundation of American freedom."

"This is the end of welfare as we know it."

"Buy a lot of Pepsi, get a lot of stuff."

Or, as Mr. Phipps puts it, *"The whole concept of the nature of God is broader and wider and more mysterious and more holy than could be expressed in Jesus."*

The alleged ineffability⁸ of God is necessary to marginalize God and to leave room for the self-absorption of capitalist culture. By such speech the Powers keep things fixed, contained, and manageable. It is essential that things be univocal, that definitions of what can be and what cannot be be kept limited, that all information come to us through officially approved channels.

If there is to be counterspeech, some free word uttered against The Powers, it must come from the outside, some *verbum externum* (Luther⁹), word from above, from heaven.

*In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit
upon all flesh,*

*and your sons and your
daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall
see visions,
and your old men shall
dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men
and women,
in those days I will pour out
my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy (Acts 2:17-18).*

It takes much power for slaves to speak, for those on the bottom, both men and women, some of them already retired, to be prophets, to speak truth to power, for sons and daughters to stand up to their parents, for old people to dream, verbally to render a world other than that offered by the Empire. We have preached in the past as testimony derived from that power, in fulfillment of the promise ("You will be my witnesses....to the ends of the earth," Acts 1:8), any future for preaching derives from the same external source.

Postmodern Preaching

What will preaching be in postmodernity? I have hunches (in postmodernity, sweeping generalizations, final statements of fact are suspect). It will be preaching which is less troubled over submitting itself to the now discredited canons of modernity (reason, objectivity, universality, scientism, historicism, and the others) and more open to the claims which originated in a time other than our own among a people other than ourselves (that is, *Scripture*).¹⁰ I think it will be preaching which exploits the linguistic construction of all reality, as long as postmodernists understand that Christians do *not* believe all reality is a byproduct of human discourse. We believe that the most "real" of what we call "reality" is the product of a relentlessly self-revealing God and the conversation this God has initiated with us at Pentecost. We now live in the reality constructed by this Word.¹¹

It will be speech which acknowledges the political significance (power configurations) of all speaking, therefore it will be speech tied to the distinctive linguistic community of the gospel (that is, *Church*).¹² It will take Acts 2 as its model, a word from heaven meant, not just to speak to the world, but rather to change the world through the generation of a countercultural community named Church. The promise is of the evocation of a new people, a counterpolity offered "for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him" (Acts 2:39).

More important than even this, it will be preaching which admits that it is derivative from and frighteningly dependent upon steady traffic between here and heaven. All faithful preaching begins as an act of a determinedly self-revealing God, Yahweh who loves to talk, who delights in argument, declaration, epistemological conflict, assertion, and promise.¹³ It will be preaching which constantly points beyond itself to the Savior whom some called Word Made Flesh. It will be speaking which worries more about obedience to the text than to the allegedly contemporary context of our speaking.¹⁴ It will trouble itself more over proclaiming the Word than it bothers

with the lack of contemporary response to the Word. Realizing the grave limits of modernity, it will be preaching which is willing not to be heard, understood, or grasped by affluent, late twentieth-century people. It will be preaching which learns to live with polyphony, which delights in the conflicted thickness of the biblical text, even though there will be a few modernist holdouts who insist that reality be spoken to them unimaginatively, in prose, univocally.¹⁵ Interpretation is everything and where you are standing when you are interpreting is even more. We preachers ought never to forget that what Acts 2 wants us to call gift of the Holy Spirit, the world attributed to too much booze too early in the day (Acts 2:12). These matters may be read in a variety of ways and interpretation is heavily dependent upon where you happen to be located when you get the news.

“God’s Word comes only because God sends it. . . . It comes only because it is sent from heaven. . . . There’s a vast difference between the Word that is sent from heaven and that which by my own choice and device I invent,” says premodern Luther.¹⁶ Modernity, and the liberalism it spawned, enforced a closed epistemology in which all knowledge was self-derived, readily available to anyone, anywhere, who used the methodology of modernity to think. Modernity arrogantly claimed that everything in the world is capable of being known, “grasped,” by anyone who is “reasonable.”¹⁷ There is nothing miraculous, gifted, or unavailable to the knower, nothing essential to be added to the natural world from outside the natural world. Some have called this modern way of knowing “demystification.” I prefer to call it modern closed mindedness.¹⁸

Christians know only because we have been addressed by a self-revealing God. All of our knowing is miraculous, a gift of God from outside the limits of our experience, even so determinative an experience as the experience of women or of the oppressed. Preaching has something to say to the world only because of the grace of God. Preaching is heard, not because the preacher has succeeded at last in making common sense contact with modern people, but rather because of a miraculous intervention of God. Barth says that if you will always think of preaching as you are told to think of “manna” in Exodus 16, you will not be far from the Kingdom.¹⁹

Most of the writing about preaching in the last couple of decades has been concerned with style, organization, presentation, technique. Devotees of “inductive preaching,” and “story preaching” have often criticized older homiletical methods for being manipulative, coercive, and a violation of the way in which the human consciousness works. Note that the debate is still preoccupied with concerns about human consciousness, what Thomas G. Long has called contemporary homiletics’ momentous “turn to the listener.” Homiletical theory thus takes as its starting point debate about what can or cannot be expected of the listener rather than declaration of what can or cannot be expected of Yahweh.²⁰ Though Barth wrote before this turn, surely this is why Barth ends his ruminations on the Word of God with the most extended treatise on the Trinity since the Reformation. A relentlessly self-communicating God named Trinity is the reason for the conversation called preaching.

Aristotle, and his preoccupation with the listener, are hard habits to get over. There have been few improvements on Aristotle’s psychological analysis of the various states of consciousness within the listener, which makes all the more sad that contemporary homiletics continues to plow essentially anthropological (i.e. Godless) ground.²¹ Aristotle has already devised a wonderful rhetoric for those who do not have

a God who speaks. Why should we?

I remember an old preacher saying that at least two miracles happened that day at Pentecost. The promised Holy Spirit descended with power. Yes. Equally miraculous was that Peter preached. Peter, who could find nothing to say in the courtyard when confronted by the maid just a few weeks ago (Luke 22:54-62), stood up, raised his voice, preached (2:14).

Preaching is still sign and wonder (Acts 2:43), a gift, miracle, irrefutable evidence of a sound from heaven.

Notes

¹ As quoted in *The Christian Century*, 17 December 1997, 1185

² I admit that I find much to commend the statement by the late Oxford classicist, who said just before his demise last year, "Twentieth Century, I hate your guts"

³ *Lord, Teach Us The Lord's Prayer and the Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 34 ff

⁴ Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992)

⁵ I wonder if Colleen McCannell and Bernhard Lang's *Heaven: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) is in danger of portraying heaven as the best and brightest of human aspiration rather than a realm, a place which is counter to our kingdoms

⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1969), 96. It was on this basis that Barth could read Paul Tillich's laborious attempts to do theology on the basis of some alleged *analogia entis* and declare the whole Tillichian enterprise to be ultimately "uninteresting," 68

⁷ Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (New York: Scribner, 1997)

⁸ That aspect of human knowledge of God which Phipps calls broad, wide, and mysterious is better described as *gift*. Because the knowledge of God comes to us only as grace, as miraculous divine self-disclosure, we can never boast, presume security, or be smug in our epistemology. It is pure gift. "We do not see everything in subjection to God. But we do see Jesus, revealing the grace of God." (Heb 2:8-9, italics mine)

⁹ From Luther's commentary on Psalm 45

¹⁰ See Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993)

¹¹ So Barth could speak of the Word of God as the most objective reality there is, a fact beyond human construction. See Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology 1910-1931* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 95-96

¹² See William H. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992)

¹³ "Proclamation must mean the repetition of the divine promise." Barth, 74. No one has demonstrated better the peculiar rhetoric of Yahweh and the peculiar people such rhetoric evokes than Walter Brueggemann in his wonderful *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997). Appropriately, Brueggemann begins his postmodern biblical theology with reference to Barth. Repeatedly Brueggemann demonstrates that it takes quite a people to converse with Yahweh.

¹⁴ "In the longrun proclamation as self-exposition must turn out to be superfluous." Barth, 70

¹⁵ Walter Brueggemann shows how it is possible, even for an ex-historical critic, to delight, even to revel in the "powerful polyphony" of Israel's "free, expansive, and enormously imaginative" text. Brueggemann, 731

¹⁶ *Exposition on the Third and Fourth Chapters of John*, 1538, Weimar edition, 47, p. 193, l. 10, my translation

¹⁷ Barth notes that there is a close connection between Cartesian self-certainty and contemporary God-certainty in which a modern failure to acknowledge any real problem with our ability to grasp and to understand God for ourselves leads to horrible modern idolatries (Barth, 222-223)

¹⁸ Thus I think I am justified in seeing most of the work of "The Jesus Seminar" as the last gasp of modernity, one last hurrah for the historical-critical reductionistic attempt to tame Jesus. It will fail, not because of insufficient scholarship but because Jesus is a revealing subject rather than an understandable object. Again, Barth, "This thing, the Word of God, is not a thing, but the living, personal, and free God"

(226) See my brief exchange on this theme with Marcus Borg, "Encountering Jesus An Exchange," *The Christian Century*, 5 November 1997, 1009-1013

¹⁹ Barth, 272

²⁰ Surely this is why Barth ends his ruminations on the Word of God with the treatise on the Trinity (Barth, 339-560). When we say "the Word of God," we are not speaking of some divine technique of communication. We mean to say that, in Barth's opening sentence of his section on the Trinity (Barth, 339), "God's Word is God Himself." If contemporary homiletics insists on beginning, with Aristotle, in anthropology, one hopes that it will follow Barth and end, before the year 2000, with some thought about God. Though it is difficult to see how one manages to get free of the gravitational pull of anthropology if one keeps beginning there, from below, rather than beginning with God, from above.

²¹ The hearing which is particularly associated with preaching is, says Barth, "a miracle quite insusceptible of an anthropological interpretation," 276