

Ah, Nadja! — Passion in Preaching¹

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At first this article was entitled, “Passionate about Preaching,” but preaching itself is not what those who do it ought to be passionate about — it is the text which must kindle their ardor. More accurately, it is the LORD of the text who makes us fervent, and his presence is conveyed to us by the text. But it was Nadja who showed me the passion.

Last night my husband and I savored our monthly date to hear the Oregon Symphony. Through my husband’s binoculars, I watched intently as the symphony’s music director, James DePreist, conducted and Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg played Felix Mendelssohn’s Violin Concerto in e minor. Actually, Nadja doesn’t *play* the violin. She dances, dreams, and discourses with it; makes it sing and cry and laugh; exults, romances, and grows angry through it; soars, leaps, flits, and floats with it; smiles, frowns, marvels, and sighs over it; paints, tints, and sculpts with it; aches, rejoices, laments, yearns, lambastes, jokes, and frolics through it. Her feet never stand still; her fingers scamper; her face is constantly in motion. With eyes closed in supreme concentration, she appears usually to be overwhelmed by the immense beauty she is creating.

When the concerto was finished, all of us in the capacity crowd bolted to our feet in thunderous applause and bravo calls. After the second half of the concert, ten times more people than usual hurried to the main floor for the Sunday-only post-concert discussion with the soloist. Nadja’s devotion to the music is echoed in the ardor of her audience.

I was haunted all the way home — at first by wondering about the difference between Nadja and other performers. Then I realized that I was more haunted by wishing the Gospel could have such an impact, since its music is even more of a gift. Mendelssohn’s concerto is called “the jewel” of the repertoire, but the Gospel is the best news in the world and the splendor of God is better than life! If Nadja can be such a force for music that she stirs people of all ages, why can’t we inspire the saints as powerfully when we preach?

She gives herself exhaustively into the service of the world’s best music. Those who preach have the privilege of entrusting themselves entirely into the hands of the supreme Composer, so that his praise resounds with the melodies and harmonies of the cosmos.

Passion Is the Key

Nadja breathes in the music and becomes so engrossed in it that she sings it forth, constantly finding new nuances, new colors to carol. We, too, can bring “out of [our] treasure what is new and what is old,” for we are “scribe[s] who [have] been trained for the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 13:52). We have the possibility of becoming so enraptured by the text, so passionate about the Lord of the text, that we can hardly wait to speak it forth to the congregation.

I know I am not a great preacher, but I can certainly tell the difference when the

text takes over, as opposed to when I try to “convince the crowd” out of my own capacities. When Spirit-passion seizes us, when the text speaks for itself, then both we and the listeners are transported into another world, into the dominion of God. What an immense privilege it is to display the kingdom and invite the Christian community to participate more fully in it.

Nadja welcomes everyone into the music with her passion. Her autobiography begins, “This is something I know for a fact: You have to work hardest for the thing you love most. And when it’s music that you love, you’re in for the fight of your life.”² She is not afraid to let her devotion be seen — and the result is that others can envision and hear what they have not understood before.

Of course, we can’t all be so fiery as Nadja. Our passion will come out differently in distinct personalities; it will be expressed in diverse ways. Six months ago, sixteen-year-old Sarah Chang played the Sibelius violin concerto with the Oregon Symphony. She is reserved, gentle, graceful, in contrast to Nadja’s robustness and aggressiveness, but her music is equally compelling. By her body’s turns and tilt she displayed the tangled movement of Sibelius’ musical line and enabled me to follow his progressions with a new comprehension I had never experienced before.

Similarly, every preacher, by his/her particular passionate involvement with the text, might help us to see meanings we’ve never noticed before. Each might be a vehicle for wholly new ways to think about texts, how they welcome us into God’s presence and form us to be God’s people.

Our passion is kindled by absorption into the texts, by our diligent study and prayer, by our eagerness to work hard at listening to them so that they can reveal new insights into, and intimacies with, God. Sometimes the texts force us to probe them again and again, to bow before them in humility and obedience, to let the “three-personed” God “batter our hearts,” as John Donne writes. This is especially crucial when the texts assigned for the day are difficult, dissonant, dark, devastating. Engaged in the texts for the sake of their Lord, we are set free to let their mysteries stay suspended, to allow their questions to linger unanswered, to challenge those who hear to tarry devoutly in the presence of divine, impenetrable Truth.

There is safety there. In our postmodern world, people are desperate for a place where the inscrutable can be queried and quarried. In the assurance that God is the absolute Truth even if we can’t know it absolutely, what is confusing can be sorted and what is baffling can be made less threatening. In the security of the constancy of God’s faithfulness, what is beyond comprehension can be accepted.

This happens more fully if the preacher is confident that God can be trusted to listen to our laments and if the Christian community incarnates God’s love. Both the preacher’s certainty and the possibility of genuine community are matters of spiritual intimacy.

Intimacy with God and the Community

Before the Mendelssohn concerto began, Nadja and conductor DePreist amused us all by engaging in a bit of “schtick”: DePreist pulled his crutch (necessary because of polio) away from Nadja, and she responded by jabbing him with her bow. During the post-concert discussion one attendee asked about the deep rapport between the two. Nadja responded that the primary factor in any performance is always one’s relationship with the conductor. Second is one’s relationship with the orchestra, which

is amplified if the conductor is the musical director himself and if he has good rapport with the orchestra.

The parallels are obvious. Any sermon depends on our relationship with God. That is such a truism as to seem almost trite, and yet it is profoundly difficult for those who constantly speak of God to keep speaking with God. Our own depressions and failures often teach us the need for much greater intentionality in setting aside daily times for Scripture meditation and prayer, monthly retreats for deeper reflection, Sabbath days of resting in God's grace in order to learn to listen more attentively.

Second most important for sermons is our partnership with the congregation, which is integrally related to their intimacy with God. My sermons always begin with the liturgical refrain, "The Lord be with you"/"And also with you" because I need the connection with the community. Since most of my preaching is as a guest in a congregation, I do not have the privilege of those of you who live amidst, and serve, the same people all the time — and the result is sermons that are not so directly relevant, not so intimately upbuilding. Sometimes that makes possible more admonition or observations that cannot be revealed by the resident pastor. Often a guest preacher can be a voice from outside to underscore the theology of the community's leaders. But always there is less of a relationship, and thus my sermons can only be second best. They are monstrous if God does not inhabit them.

Nadja said that the third most important factor in her performance is the acoustics of the concert hall. That might cause us to think about the setting in which we preach, the ambience of our worship spaces. We do not need to be very interested at this point in acoustics and architecture and adornments, though those are significant concerns, but the true atmosphere of our worship abode depends primarily on whether we have created genuine community and the cohesiveness of the worship service in which the sermon finds its place.

As one example, in the discussion time Nadja was asked about the fact that she is attracting young people to concert halls, and she responded that she considers it, gladly, a great responsibility. Similarly, we pay attention to accessible word choices in our preaching and add specific examples so that the youth of the community feel welcomed and a part of the congregation's life. Most important, good rapport with all the people outside of the worship service invites them more thoroughly into the sermon's dance with God.

On Being a Wordsmith

Someone in the post-concert discussion commented on how quietly Nadja had played certain portions of the concerto. She responded, "Every time I play I try to create as many colors as possible — as many as I have the control to produce."

This artistry has parallels in our preaching. If we are painting the kingdom of God so that listeners can enter it more fully, then we have enormous possibilities for hues and shades and tints and nuances.

In the art world the word *hue* especially signifies a specific color; the word *shade* technically means a darkening of a color by the addition of black; and the word *tint* particularly indicates the lightening of a color by the addition of white. To shade the hues of God to darken them more profoundly is to deepen our humility before his mystery and hiddenness; to tint God's colors more brightly is to heighten our Joy at all the splendors and excellences of his glory. The final word *nuances* inserts the

possibility of indicating these slight differences in pigments so that others can notice and appreciate them. To make careful theological nuances is an important task of the preacher.

One of the great advantages of the Revised Common Lectionary is that over the course of three years, with four different readings each Sunday and festival day (from the First Testament, Psalms, Epistles, and Gospels), the preacher possesses the resources of multitudes of narratives that disclose an abundance of attributes and interventions of God to evoke in the listener myriads of insights and affections and motivations and transformations. The immense possibilities create a significant reason for congregation members to be present at every worship service. There is much too much to learn about God, far too many ways to encounter God, enormously too deep an eternity to explore for anyone to miss any of the gatherings of the community.

Nadja's final qualification — that she creates the colors she has the control to produce — warns us, too. Our paintbrushes are words, and we work hard to use them skillfully in order "to present [ourselves] to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth" (II Tim. 2:15). We are wordsmiths, artisans, caretakers of words in a society that renders them inflated and hypocritical, deceptive and meaningless.³

The Word exercises control over our words. We need disciplines of attentiveness and study, habits of preparation and organization, practices of prayer and fellowship, and a life of obedience so that our hues are accurate, our shades and tints faithful, our nuances clear. Then we picture as much of God as possible; we sketch the kingdom and flesh it out in myriads of colors.

The Word We Preach

Nadja was asked about the violin she played, and she exulted that it was a Guarnerius and that with only one more payment she would own it completely. A superior instrument enables a performer to produce stellar sound.

How we can rejoice that the Word we preach is premier — we proclaim the Trinity disclosed to us in the words of Scripture, a faithful narrative, God's Revelation.⁴ Even as a violin improves with age, so God's Word becomes more precious to us as we live with it. Also, the Revelation is becoming increasingly valuable as our society veers more and more into a postmodern despair that increases persons' desperation for the sure reference point of the biblical meta-narrative. With such a good instrument upon which to sing, we can voice sermons of scintillating color.

Restoring the Passion

If we are passionate about the texts and the Lord of the texts when we preach, it will cost us. We are painting a vision of the kingdom of God in opposition to the reign in this world of other powers, and that spiritual battle will exhaust us. We will have to allow ourselves plenty of time to recover, a Sabbath of rest. Just as musicians go to supper after a concert, preachers need Sabbath feasting to wind down and stoke up.⁵

We might also have to fight the darknesses of doubts, the fiends of seeming failure in society's terms, the monsters of our personal hangups, the demons of misunderstanding on the part of those who hear or refuse to hear. Our best protection against the foes, of course, is a constant nourishing of our spiritual life. Those who preach need

gifts for their faith that free them to love to preach. When we discover our preaching has become a burden or merely a duty, then we need to take time to re-ignite our sacred fire. I pray that those reading this article have a community to support them in taking time for devotions, solitude, meditation, Sabbath, retreat, prayer, refreshment, silence, contemplation, reflection, study, renewal — whatever words we use, whatever forms are useful — for “rooting and establishing” our faith and fostering its growth, for kindling our love and stoking its flames.

When to Be Hard on Ourselves

Finally, someone in the post-concert discussion asked Nadja if she was hard on herself before performing. She answered, “No, not before performing. That is the time for confidence and staying loose; you shouldn’t knock yourself when you are nervous. But I am very hard on myself when I practice.”

We often lose our passion because of fear of failure, and those anxieties are accentuated if we are hard on ourselves just before preaching, instead of letting ourselves rest in the sure knowledge that we are the beloved of God and privileged to be servants of his Word and words. In contrast, our passion is propelled if we present ourselves “with eyes wide open to the mercies of God” (as J. B. Phillips paraphrases Rom. 12:1) — as those who are already chosen, holy, and dearly loved (Col. 3:12).

But we, like Nadja, need to be very hard on ourselves when we practice. We carefully schedule daily periods to nurture our own spiritual growth. We allow plenty of time to engage in and absorb the texts about which we preach; we meditate upon them and sit before them with open minds and lives. We spend all week preparing our sermons. Then those disciplines set us free to preach out of the sheer beauty of the music.

A brilliant chamber musician and accompanist friend of mine taught me the importance of tough self discipline. She drills a musical phrase over and over countless times to make the fingering seamless, rehearses sets of phrases moving backwards through a piece to strengthen memory, pores over scores to learn structure and notice nuances. The results of these disciplines are evident as she performs — with absolute freedom and abandonment to the delights and passions of the beauty her skill creates.

Similarly, we read phrases over and over to make seamless theological connections. We study texts in Hebrew and Greek and various translations to strengthen our understanding. We pore over the structures of biblical books and notice nuances in semantic domains to learn why authors might have chosen a particular word to convey specific meanings. The result is freedom to “play” with texts.⁶

One other reason for the fear of failure that leads to un-passion must be mentioned here. Our times are characterized by so much competition between churches to attract members. Pastors feel that their sermons need to be great in order for their congregations to grow, and that is usually understood in terms of growing in numbers (but not necessarily deeper — fatter, but not stronger). That is put crassly, but it fiercely distresses me that the work of proclaiming the Gospel is being reduced these days to consumerist and competitive marketing terms (see, in contrast, Luke 22:24–27).⁷

Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg is one of the world’s greatest violinists not because she plays to be the greatest, but because she plays for the love of it. During a radio interview she said that a near-tragic accident caused her to realize that she couldn’t live

without playing the violin. Slicing a finger severely, but having it restored by a skillful physician (and, I would add, the grace of God), Nadja experienced deep renewal in her art and life.

We don't preach to attract crowds; we preach because we are overwhelmed by the splendor of God's kingdom and overflowing with eagerness to proclaim his faithful mercy. That takes us full circle back to where we began. It was the wrong question to ask how the Gospel could have more impact, how our preaching could influence as many people as Nadja's violin playing. The question is how preachers could more Joyfully play with texts out of passion for God. As good stewards of the "multi-faceted" grace of God, then, we who preach speak the very oracles of God (I Peter 4:10-11). If we serve the Gospel well, its influence will shine forth in a diamond's array of God's colors.

Notes

¹ This is an abbreviated version of chapter 10 in Marva J. Dawn's *A Royal "Waste" of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999).

² Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg, *Nadja: On My Way* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1989), 1.

³ See Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985).

⁴ Capitalizing the word *Revelation* is suggested by Jacques Ellul's "Innocent Notes on 'The Hermeneutic Question'" which underscores the trustworthiness of Scripture and the importance of a presupposition of faith in reading it. See Marva J. Dawn, trans. and ed., *Sources and Trajectories: Eight Early Articles by Jacques Ellul that Set the Stage* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 184-203.

⁵ See Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989).

⁶ For excellent suggestions for preparation and a superb emphasis on the importance of preaching out of love and out of "playing" with the texts, see Robert Farrar Capon, *The Foolishness of Preaching: Proclaiming the Gospel against the Wisdom of the World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998).

⁷ See also Philip D. Kenneson and James L. Street, *Selling Out the Church: The Dangers of Church Marketing* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997).