

Preaching at the Beginning of a New Millennium: Learning from Our Predecessors

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When New Year's Eve rolls around on December 31, 1999, in most ways we will be right to treat it as just another Friday night, or as just another New Year's Eve. If we cannot eliminate the possibility of it being the arrival of Luke's delayed parousia, we can affirm connection with that night as arbitrary. Even creative use of math does not yield how the year 2000 relates to the "time, two times, and a half a time" of Daniel 7:25 and Revelation 12:14 (where a time is seventy times seven days), to the 1000 years of Christ's reign in Revelation 20:1-7, or to other apocalyptic timetables in the Bible. Math's inadequacy may not deter increasing predictions of the apocalypse, like flotsam on religion's waters, as the year 2000 draws near. Preaching may be tutored by many aspects of history as we move into the third millennium, not just with regard to such predictions, although here we will restrict ourselves to four areas of focus:

I. *Preach apocalyptic texts.* An important short-term lesson can be to deal directly with millennial issues, preaching the tough apocalyptic texts when they arise. Even before the end of the second century, a Montanist bishop in Syria was so convinced of Christ's early return as foretold in scripture that he led his flock into the wilderness to meet Christ. Another bishop, preaching in Pontus in the same era, gave a two-year countdown, ordering his flock to cease work in their fields and to sell their possessions.¹ Radical Anabaptist Melchior Hoffmann predicted that after his own imprisonment and death, he would return in 1533 with Christ in the clouds, and Strassburg would become the site of the New Jerusalem. Such predictions have been common in bad times and good. Our own era is no exception.

I am old enough to remember school air-raid drills at the time of the Cuban missile crisis when John F. Kennedy was president. Those sirens awakened a beginning of awareness that even the idea of "world wars" did not capture, the possibility of the end of life as we know it on earth. No sooner had the Berlin wall fallen, bringing an end to Cold War news stories (though not to the nuclear weapons stockpile), than with little warning, although evidence had been growing, headlines started appearing about the ozone hole, genetic mutation, and the greenhouse effect. Western culture apparently needs a death focus. Hal Lindsay's heresy in *The Late Great Planet Earth* was to pretend to know the hour, when in fact "no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Matt. 24:36).

Wise preachers throughout the ages have seen the terrible power of fear. Christianity is a faith of hope, even in the face of fear and tremendous human responsibility to alter our ways. By avoiding the danger of preaching fear on the one hand, and of downplaying the seriousness of environmental and other threats that face us on the other, we can teach our congregations an appropriate and faithful attitude toward the future that is so needed in this time.

The apocalyptic biblical texts give us one set of opportunities. People are right to be vigilant concerning the future, for the future belongs to God and God's purposes

will be accomplished. These texts need not be ignored or left in the hands of those who would manipulate vulnerable souls to their own purposes. There will be a time of reckoning, even if we do not know when it will be, and even if our language (including that of scripture) fails us concerning that time. If the future is a time of termination and ruin for all injustice and evil, it is also a time of hope that can lend courage to the present. Preachers might also start catching up on all of those books on eschatology they have been purchasing and putting aside for a rainy day.

II. *Preach God.* A second area to which history speaks is the need to recover focus on God's lively and loving gracious action in history and in the world today. From the time of St. Paul forward through the Reformation and into our own time, preachers have assumed that sermons talk about God, precisely because the sermon is God's Word. The fourfold "senses" of scripture witnessed in Origen and developed into an exegetical norm by Jerome and others, helped ensure a focus on God for preaching. Texts could be explored sermonically in turn for a literal or historical sense, an allegorical sense having to do with faith and the church, a moral sense relating to the soul, and a prophetic or mystical sense concerning the final things. Doctrinal sermons that often dominated the church's preaching also generally encouraged a theological focus. Though they regularly fell short by exegetical standards, preachers moved through the Bible highlighting verses to support (or sometimes proof-text) a doctrinal argument.

Much of the impetus for focus on God was lost in this century, in part with the recovery of the pericope in exegetical studies.² The original form, setting, and purpose of various Bible passages has been approximated, if not recovered, along with a sense of the rich canonical traditions that shaped and influenced the texts as we now have them. Various critical approaches to the Bible have allowed new insights to the meanings of texts, and opened possible directions for the preacher. However, as preachers we may have been misled into thinking that to preach a pericope is to preach the text theologically.

The range of interpretative options may be confusing. Theologian Douglas Hall credits contemporary theologies emanating from special interest groups with "a certain necessary ferment in the churches, [but] they have not greatly stimulated the kind of foundational thinking that...renews."³ Deconstruction "takes apart" and as such characterizes much postmodern thought, including theology. Dwindling church membership accompanies it. In order for preaching and the church to be renewed we cannot look merely to new forms of sermons, or to technology that might turn the preacher into a thirty-foot three-dimensional laser hologram on the chancel steps, or even to new forms of worship.

Preaching is God's Word, and God chooses to use it and the sacraments to communicate God's identity and thereby our own. For all of the many contributions of deconstructive theologies, particularly in exposing the sins of racism, classism, sexism, and individualism, and in pointing to the ways that power in human systems can be misused to oppress, these theologies focus mostly on human sin and corrective action. Rudolf Bohren says this turns faith into legalism: "Legalism places its hope in human ability, not in God's power, therefore, the 'to be' fails because of the 'ought to be.' " If we learn little else from history, our preaching should reflect Augustine and Luther on Justification: God never places a burden on us to act without also graciously

giving us the means and power to accomplish what is required in Jesus Christ.

Preachers who are newly appreciative of the literary nature of biblical texts, encouraged by scholarly resources for the lectionary pericopes, may be excused for thinking that preaching the text is sufficient. One can preach an entire biblical passage and never get to God. Even many biblical texts never mention God. For Luther the sole purpose of scripture was to reveal Jesus Christ, and his preaching was vital because he understood salvation to be taking place in and through it.

Furthermore, there is still a need to preach doctrine, even as various contemporary theologies offer new possibilities in this regard.⁴ Increasing pluralism in society will require that the church speak with clarity to its beliefs. Art Van Seters, writing on the third millennium, wonders whether “tradition and the need for the tradition [have] been overwhelmed by a certain way of trying to engage the world on its own terms.”⁵ The lesson he has learned from interfaith dialogue partners is “that we bring our highest Christology to the dialogue and witness openly to the particularity of our own tradition.”⁶

There have been standards for great preaching. Some pulpits used to have a small plaque for the preacher to see inscribed with the words of the Greeks who came to Philip (John 12:21), “We wish to see Jesus.” James S. Stewart, the great Scottish preacher of this century, in his Warrack lectures gave this simple congregational test: “Did they, or did they not, meet God today?”⁷ Fred Craddock echoes this: “To say that Christian preaching is or should be about God is to say something central to who we are, what we are about, and how we regard the world in which we live out our faith, the world God created and loves.”⁸

In short, there needs to be a return to God at the heart of what we preach. The starting point of preparing to preach and the central focus of preaching can be God’s action in or behind the biblical text. It is not enough for preachers to wave pleasantly in God’s direction toward the end of the sermon. The sermon needs to move to a solid focus on God’s action as a response to human sin, brokenness, and needs that have been illuminated by the light of the passage. Without this attention to God, arising first from the biblical text at hand and applied to our world, all the gains of contemporary exegesis and biblical understanding can be for naught.

III. *Preach with a single focus.* A third learning from history is the importance of imagination and rhetoric. The two are related. Boring or humorless renderings of the Word unfortunately have never been considered a heresy; what they induce is in surprising contrast to the living nature of God’s Word. Augustine wrote the first Christian textbook in homiletics and rooted it in rhetoric, the art of being persuasive. Sermons first had to interest their hearers. He demonstrated the need for imagination even in interpretation. In moving beyond the literal meaning of a passage to a figurative meaning, he imaginatively sought what contributed to the rule of love (*On Christian Doctrine*, III:15).

Imagination in the service of persuasive love is a good way of thinking about the contributions of many preachers throughout history: the metrical sermons of Ephraim, Romanos, and John of Damascus (forerunners of narrative preachers); the eloquent controlled images of John Donne and Bernard of Clairvaux; the oral folk-preaching of people like Harry Hoosier (“Black Harry,” 1750-1810, who laid the foundations for the experiential and celebrative emphasis of African-American preaching); and S.T.

Coleridge's and Horace Bushnell's understandings of imagination (a foundation for contemporary understandings of art and metaphor).

Rhetoric and imagination, classically referred to as rhetoric and poetics, are both gifts and skills that can be learned. A poet is not a poet until discipline is learned—an insight gained by the young poet, Stephen Daedalus, by the end of James Joyce's *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*. Imagination in preaching is similarly not wild free association, or images without a controlling line of thought. Doctrine and ideas are essential for preaching. Rather than dispense with ideas, as some might have us do,⁹ we may continue to learn from rhetoric how to communicate with interest and sensitivity. We are already alert to how doctrine may be communicated through metaphor and story as well as through propositional thought, and by inductive as well as deductive means of preaching.

Sermons die as easily with boring propositions as with excessive imagery, pointless stories, and lack of direction. Keep a single simple focus: listeners should be able to identify what the sermon is about in one simple sentence. In addition, try to develop only one central image, taken either from the biblical text or from something to which the unifying idea points in today's world. Check whether images and stories function as literary images, drawing attention to themselves for their own sake, or as theological images, serving the larger single theological purpose of the sermon. Even Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey can function only at a literary level if the significance of his words and actions is ignored. In sermon revision, adjust mere literary images to appropriate obvious theological purpose.

IV. Preach with global awareness. A final lesson from history to be named here concerns what I call the claustrophobia generated in too many North American pulpits. Such preaching is inward gazing, us-centered, church-focused preaching, as though worries about the church and what it thinks are the most urgent issues in people's lives, or as though exclusive focus on the local community is a faithful response to God's creation. By contrast, sermons can be open to God's love for all people, wherever there is crisis today, and uphold God's redeeming justice in the world.

Concern for justice and the poor was essential in the Old Testament, where it was never separate from righteousness toward God. One of the root meanings for the Hebrew word salvation means "wide open space"—the opposite of what is suggested by claustrophobia. Justice was central to Jesus' own ministry and preaching. In fact, justice has been so much a part of life and mission in the church at its best that it is hard to account for the absence of much preaching on the subject in surviving sermons.

Some preachers come to mind for their obvious concern for justice: Chrysostom preached against corruption of high officials; Thomas Muntzer preached against the slaughter of the peasants; Calvin's Geneva was organized for the welfare of all; in sixteenth century South America, Bartholomé de Las Casas preached against the decimation of Amerindians¹⁰ and Archbishop Toribio of Lima, Peru, anticipated liberation theology¹¹; John Wesley preached against slavery and his Methodist movement laid the foundations for the Social Gospel movement¹²; Phoebe Palmer and others spoke for the rights of women; and Martin Luther King, Jr., died for the civil rights movement.

Still, there appears to have been little warrant for preaching on social justice through most of the history of the church. What are the reasons for this? They are hard

to identify. One reason is that justice, understood as the outcome of responsible decisions in human social systems, is a relatively recent concept, a product of the Enlightenment and upheavals of the industrial revolution. The primary focus of justice shifted from preconceived rights and powers ordained by God to the administration of fair rules of conduct agreed upon by members of a social contract.

David Buttrick holds Karl Barth responsible for denying the social relevance of preaching in our own times.¹³ Other factors were involved. Karl Marx and the growth of social science gave legitimacy to class struggle and the voice of the poor and oppressed in this century. Many liberal pulpits, notably Riverside Church in New York, became identified with social justice. Still, opposition to Soviet-style communism, along with Vatican and cultural opposition to mixing religion with politics, contributed to the silence of pulpits on some social issues.

Important shifts are taking place that will have an impact on preaching. Both so-called mainline and evangelical churches are in a period of decline.¹⁴ A surprising recent survey by sociologist Reginald Bibby in Canada indicates that, since 1975, evangelical Christians have become more convinced, while all other Christians have become less convinced, that religion should be concerned with politics. Only 26% of "Conservative Protestant Christians," think that "Ministers should stick to religion and not concern themselves with social, economic, and political issues." This is down from 35% in 1975. By contrast other Protestants and Roman Catholics range between 43% and 58%, considerably up from 1975.¹⁵ While Christian camps differ on their ideas and methods of achieving justice, calls for justice under law do not necessarily belong to one group or another. As one ethicist sees the difference, "...some [theologians] find individualistic, consensual systems of justice too permissive and inattentive to other moral questions. Others believe that the standards of justice that can be achieved by mutual consent fall far short of the human care that the love of God requires."¹⁶

Most preachers cannot allow partisan politics to set the justice agenda for preaching. From a Christian perspective, basic needs in society, like caring for the poor, the hungry, the helpless, the sick, and the homeless, transcend denominational and political differences. Sermons are an essential place to discuss people facing these dire needs, and to portray the difference that people can make with their help.

As we move into the third millennium, we witness increasing gaps between the rich and the poor around the world. Claustrophobia can be encouraged by preachers narrowly choosing between partisan approaches to justice. Claustrophobia can be encouraged by stories and illustrations coming from one ethnic background, social class, gender, or age grouping. Claustrophobia can be nurtured by the preacher remaining silent on anything but relatively trivial daily issues in life for fear of offending members of the flock. In a different vein, claustrophobia also can be fostered by treating justice issues as though they are responsibilities that are entirely up to us, with God left out of the picture.

The apparent relevance of God to contemporary life can be found in direct correspondence to the preacher's willingness to represent in story, image, and idea, matters encompassing the breadth of God's concern wherever they are found on earth—certainly here in the local community, but also there, in the big issues in the world at large. If God's nature and manner of action can be identified in and behind the biblical text, it will be easier to show how the same God is working for the

thousands of Rwandan refugees in central Africa who are in the news reports, as well as for the needs in our local community.

To avoid claustrophobia from the pulpit, the solution is not for preachers simply to count recent sermon references to major situations in the world, beyond the narrow confines of county, state, or even nation—although it is a start. Nor is the solution simply to instruct what listeners are to do, for this reduces the Word of God to moralism and legalism. Nor is the solution to preach that God cares: caring means little if it is not also accompanied by action. Rather, as we move into a new millennium, preachers can seek to recover preaching as an invitation to faith. Justice issues can be raised, less in the abstract than in terms of specific individual lives, and listeners can be invited to act in joy and freedom in accord with God's will. Such a union of evangelical heritage and justice in the pulpit might have surprising results: people might point more readily to God at work in the world and in their own lives. At minimum such preaching may assist more faithful witness by all Christians in an exciting new era for the church.

Notes

¹ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953), 128-9

² See Edward Farley, "Preaching the Bible and Preaching the Gospel," *Theology Today* 51:1 (April 1994) 90-104

³ Douglas John Hall, "The Future of Protestantism in North America," *Theology Today* 52:4 (January 1996) 462

⁴ See my "Doctrine in Preaching: Has it a Future?" *Preaching on The Brink: The Future of Homiletics*, ed. Martha J. Simmons (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 84-92

⁵ Art Van Seters, "The Problem of Preaching in the Third Millennium," *Interpretation* (July 1991) 274

⁶ *Ibid.*, 276

⁷ James S. Stewart, *Heralds of God* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), 31

⁸ Fred B. Craddock, "The Gospel of God," in Long and Farley, 76

⁹ Avoidance of ideas in preaching is a dangerous subtheme of Richard L. Eslinger, *Narrative and Imagination: Preaching the Words that Shape Us* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995). See my review of Eslinger in *Homiletic* 21:1 (Summer 1996) 12-13

¹⁰ Las Casas is mentioned in Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), xxvii & xxxv

¹¹ Mary M. McGlone, "The King's Conscience," *Catholic World* (November-December 1994) 284

¹² See for instance, Theodore W. Jennings, *Good News for the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990)

¹³ David Buttrick, *A Captive Voice: The Liberation of Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 8, and his, "On Doing Homiletics Today," *Intersections: Post-Critical Studies in Preaching*, ed. Richard L. Eslinger (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 94

¹⁴ John Killinger, *Preaching to a Church in Crisis: A Homiletic for the Last Days of the Mainline Church* (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Co., 1995). See also Millard J. Erickson and James L. Heflin, *New Wine in Old Wineskins: Doctrinal Preaching in a Changing World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 47

¹⁵ Reginald Bibby, "Project Can 95," *The Toronto Star*, 8 December 1996, A4

¹⁶ Robin W. Lovin, "Justice," *A New Handbook of Christian Theology*, ed. Donald W. Musser & Joseph L. Price (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992), 267