

Preaching into the Next Millennium

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Editor's Note: This article comes from an address to the Festival of Homiletics in Atlanta, May, 1995.

I.

The next millennium is less than four years away. Four years from today we will be heading into Easter Sunday 2000, and on one hand it is nothing, a mere coincidence of zeros. But on the other hand it is something, if only a symbol for the great shift going on all around us. It is evident in nature, in politics, in science, in religion. It is evident in human consciousness, which may be the cause of these other changes but may just as well be the effect of them. Literally and figuratively, our maps are outdated. The world does not work the way we thought it did.

Until very recently, we believed in a world that could be understood and managed. We based that assumption on the work of Sir Isaac Newton, who wrote a startling book called *Principia* in 1686. In it, he suggested that the earth circled the sun, not vice versa, and that the atom was the basic building block of the universe. So far, so good. He also suggested that the solar system worked like a vast machine, in which both atom and planet obeyed identical laws. Summing up those laws in four simple algebraic formulas, he put the mystery of the universe to bed, where it stayed tucked in for the next four hundred years.

Believing he told us the truth about how the world worked, we modeled our nations, our economies, our families, and ourselves upon atomistic principles. You were you and I was I. If each of us would do our jobs, then the big machine should keep right on humming. According to our instruction manual, its operation was predictable. If something went wrong, you had only to break it down, find the defective part and put it back together again. God was removed from the world, which could be explained without deity. Human beings were removed from the world as well. We no longer lived in it; we lived on it. It became an object to be used to our advantage, we who believed in a universe of manageable things.

During our lifetimes, this paradigm has come undone. The covers have come untucked, and mystery is once again loose in the cosmos. With the development of quantum physics, we discovered a subatomic world that did not behave the way Newton said it should. It was impossible to pin down, with waves turning into particles and particles into waves. What had mass one moment was pure energy the next, and none of it was predictable. The very act of observing a particle changed its behavior, which destroyed the whole notion of scientific objectivity. A scientist could not stand outside the world to watch it. The same particles that were busy responding to each other responded to the watcher as well, revealing a world that was not made up of manageable things but of constantly changing relationships.

It is no longer possible to think of the world as a machine. It behaves more like a living body, in which no part operates independently from the rest. The communication network of this body is still beyond anyone's grasp. In a discovery that upsets all our previous notions of space and time, we have found out that two particles

separated by whole galaxies “know” what each other is doing. Change the spin on one and the other reverses its spin wherever it is—instantaneously—using some form of communication that is faster than light.

We think it has something to do with field theory—fields being invisible, nonmaterial structures that may turn out to be the basic substance of the universe. You know about gravitational fields and electromagnetic fields. Well, imagine another kind of field that knits the whole universe together, so that a shiver in the Milky Way gives us a shiver right here, faster than the speed of light.

Some of you are familiar with what is called the butterfly effect, first brought to our attention in 1961 by a research meteorologist named Edward Lorenz. Interested in why he could not come up with a foolproof forecast, he found that every weather pattern is acutely sensitive to the conditions present at its creation. When a butterfly beat its wings in Tokyo, he said, it affected the weather weeks later in New York. We are that connected. And yet we cannot say what the effect will be, exactly, since that is not possible in a dynamic, changing system like ours. All we can do is predict a range of possibilities and then wait to see what course the living system takes.

His discovery is an example of what we call chaos theory, which does not mean that reality is wildly out of control. It simply means that reality is essentially unpredictable, because the world is an undivided whole and everything that happens one place in the web affects what is going on every place else in the web. There is an inherent order to the chaos—boundaries beyond which it will not go—but within those boundaries there are no observers, only participants.

Why am I telling you all this? Because it is changing the way we see the world, which means that it is changing us and the way we organize our life together, including church. Our politics are changing. Our economies are changing. The boundaries of our nations are changing, not to mention our minds. We are coming to the end of our love affair with finding out how things work. Knowing how to do things has not helped us decide whether or not we should do them. All our knowledge, all our technology, all our power has not kept us from killing each other. It has not kept us from fouling our nest or forsaking our young. Something more is needed, something the universe seems to be trying to tell us about our connection with each other. We are one body. This is physics, not theology. Not that it matters. The God of one is the God of the other.

II.

As the new science enters our consciousness, we are in for a shock. Our accustomed way of understanding the universe and our place in it has become outdated. Some historians say there has been nothing like it since the collapse of the Roman Empire. Everything we thought would save us has not. What we placed at the center of our lives has turned out to be toxic and—as a culture anyway—we have not yet figured out what belongs there instead. In a kind of proverb for our times, biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann says, “the world for which you have been so carefully prepared is being taken away from you, by the grace of God.” It is the last part that is the kicker, of course. The upheaval going on around us may be God’s work, not the devil’s. Our deadly way of life is collapsing in on itself, which we may read as punishment, evil, defeat. But it seems to me we may also read it as the beginning of redemption, as the deeply painful but necessary demolition that precedes new life.

Sometimes it is hard to tell the death throes from the labor pains, but as preachers that is our job: to help people sort them out, to preside at both the funeral and the birth, singing resurrection all the way. Each of us has all kinds of decisions to make about how we will address this changing world, not only as preachers and theologians but also as leaders of worship, administrators, pastors, and community representatives. The nature of our authority is changing, in case you had not noticed, along with the nature of our congregations. Whatever kind of church you serve, chances are you are preaching to a large number of people on antidepressants, to survivors of sexual abuse, to people who are addicted or recovering from addiction, to homosexual teenagers who contemplate suicide on a regular basis, to children in therapy for behavior disorders, as well as people who come to church because they do not want to know about any of that and pray God will protect them from it as long as they live.

One thing I have noticed lately is the growing gap between the church and the unchurched. I have been involved in a campus ministry this year that has brought me in contact with a wonderful, bright, funny group of college students who are positively phobic about church. They want to know why we have to call God God, why we cannot pray to Buddha along with Christ, why we do not take all the pews out of the church and sit in a circle on pillows instead.

And they are not the only ones. I also spend a good bit of time with people who have been away from the church for a long time and are flirting with coming back again, only there are certain things that bother them. They cannot, in good conscience, say the creed. "Our Father in heaven" strikes them as hopelessly archaic. They believe that the way we do church is harmful to their children, who will grow up thinking God wants them to sit still and be quiet. They want worship services and Sunday school curricula that celebrate the God of creative chaos and indeterminate gender.

And I do not disagree with them, but it is enough to give you whiplash, trying to comfort the frightened traditionalists with one hand while you are reaching out to the enlightened seekers with the other. It would be a whole lot easier to ignore one group or the other, which many churches have decided to do, but if you ask me, the stretch is an occupational hazard. It is just what you do when you are living between the end of one world and the beginning of the next.

To make it too simple, there are those who respond to a changing world by letting go of the past and those who respond by hanging on tighter. Most of our congregations include some of each, people who will continue to keep the issues fresh for us. How do we honor the tradition we have received from our ancestors without worshipping them instead of God? How do we declare what God has done without shutting ourselves down to what God may do next?

"Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old." Thus said the Lord to Isaiah in the 43d chapter of his book. "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

III.

If there is anything to the scenario I have described, then what are the implications for preaching? In a quantum world, the possibilities are endless, but I will limit myself to three—three movements I believe are in store both for us as preachers and for the people whom we serve. The first is the movement from individualism to community. The second is the movement from knowledge to passion. And the third is the

movement from overfamiliarity to reverence. These are all modest proposals, based on my own limited experience and thinking. I offer them to you for fun.

First, the movement from individualism to community. If the new science is teaching us anything, it is that we are linked together in ways we do not even understand, and yet one thing I notice when I listen to sermons—including my own—is how often they treat a congregation like a collection of individuals, addressing individual behavior, individual faith, individual fears. The point, I suppose, is for each person to sense that he or she has been spoken to directly, and sometimes they will even say it at the door. “Have you been reading my mail? Preacher, you were really talking to me today.”

This is meant to be a compliment and it is fine, as far as it goes. A person comes to church from a life in the world, receives a dose of the divine, and goes back to that life in the world, which is likely to be competitive and somewhat fractured. This is because it is based on atomistic principles, which treat people like machines. Keep them tuned and oiled and they do good work. If they break down, you can take them apart and put them back together again, or you can discard them for newer models. In an atomistic world, nothing is greater or less than the sum of its parts. One plus one always equals two and one is the basic building block of the universe.

The church knows another reality, in which one plus one is the beginning of something beyond calculation and the basic building block of the universe is not one but “wherever two or three are gathered together in my name.” Or according to an old Sufi saying, “You think because you understand *one* you must also understand *two*, because one and one make two. But you must also understand *and*.” Our business is relationship, which does not stop with relating individuals to God. Our good news is that God has related us to one another and that the least act of love has infinite consequences. We are one body, whether we act like it or not. We belong to one web that stretches across the universe, uniting us to all that is, seen and unseen. My true name is not “I” but “we.” There is only one “I” in the world—the Great I Am—and even that one, we believe, is three. If you have no other use for the doctrine of the trinity, this is enough: that even God exists in relationship.

So wouldn’t it be interesting if someone came out of church on Sunday morning and said, “Preacher, you were really talking to *us* this morning”? What if we could, through our preaching, support that sense of belonging to a body that is more than its parts, that has a life and a purpose of its own, in which people do not feel like individual atoms but like members of a whole? A pluralistic whole, by the way, not a homogeneous one. Again, I cite the Trinity, which is the Christian church’s genius metaphor for unity in diversity.

This shift of perspective will take place first in the mind of the preacher, who will begin to notice the personality of the congregation as something more than the personalities in the congregation. This may happen through as formal a process as congregational analysis, but it may also happen informally, by noticing the ratio between salads and desserts at potluck suppers, say, or by asking newcomers to give you their first impressions, or by watching to see whether leaders work together or alone.

Based on what you see when you observe these things, you may begin to offer the congregation images of themselves in community—not a collection of individuals but a body with a word to say and a job to do. This will go beyond their own local identity.

Preachers may also deepen the congregation's sense of community by telling stories from other communities, by which I mean not only other ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic communities but also other communities of discourse. How long has it been since you preached a sermon that engaged the scientific community, or the business community, or the community of the arts? Their language may be different from ours, but God is busy in all those communities, and to make connections between what they are doing and what we are doing can provide a heady sense of wholeness. When we do the opposite—when our sermons are full of churchy talk about churchy things, I think we increase our isolation, giving people the impression that religion is something separate from the rest of their lives.

Next I want to address the movement from knowledge to passion. I have read two good books on preaching lately. One is *Speaking from the Heart* by Richard Ward and the other is *With Ears to Hear* by Robin Meyers. Both make a similar point: that the only preacher worth listening to is one who is passionately involved in his or her message. If you do not think of yourself as an especially passionate person, this may sound like bad news to you, but take heart. What they are both saying, I think, is that the first step toward preaching a lively word is living it. Or, as Fred Craddock put it a long time ago, "Appropriation of the gospel is the minimum condition for standing in the pulpit."

Without denigrating the value of biblical and theological knowledge, I want to suggest that it is no longer enough. It may never have been enough, but in our late twentieth century age of information saturation, knowledge can become just one more addiction. We are hunting something more visceral than that, something with power to sustain and direct our lives. You know it when you hear it. Someone stands up to preach and the first thing you notice is that it is a real voice, not a phony one. This is not someone doing an imitation of a preacher. This is someone speaking to you from the heart, in the same voice he would use to wish you happy birthday or say a prayer by your bed. No high drama, no polished gestures, but gravity, yes—the unmistakable sense that what he is about to say matters, to him and to you. You may even get the sense that it has cost him something—some sleep, some peace of mind—that putting this sermon together has required more of him than working a crossword puzzle or washing the car.

I believe that the best thing we can do for our preaching is to surrender ourselves to God and our neighbors and then to tell the truth about what that is like. It is so important not to lie. We do so much damage when we tell people things are easier than they are, or that if they just do this then that will happen, or that God will make everything all right. They want to believe us but they know better, and the net effect is that they learn to keep us separate from the rest of their lives. They nod at our sweet lies on Sunday and on Monday they go back to surviving any way they can.

The more we ground our sermons in everyday life, the better. The more we tell the truth about human experience, the better. And the more we avoid religious cliché, the better.

Three weeks ago at the airport I was waiting for my luggage when I heard a couple talking behind me.

"How was your flight?" he said.

"It was awful!" she said. "I had to sit next to an (expletive deleted) preacher, and you know how they are. Yakety-yakety-yak, the whole way. I got everything—God,

Jesus, the Bible—everything. They’ve got no-smoking flights. Next time I’m going to ask for a no-preaching flight.”

I am afraid I know what she meant, and preachers are not the only ones who suffer from it. It is a disconnection from true life, a disconnection from true feeling, that so often turns our talk into yakety-yakety-yak, that and a disconnection from each other that keeps us from listening. Passion, I think, is one word for recovering the connections—between you and me, between God and us, between us and the whole creation—preaching that comes from the heart and the gut as well as the mind, describing a life that is recognizable to our hearers, a world they live in. If they cannot trust us to speak the truth about earthly things, how then will they trust us when we come to the heavenly ones?

In the next millennium, knowledge *about* God will not preach. Knowledge *of* God will. And if that is too much to ask, then passionate pursuit of God will do. Those who listen to us expect more than a history lesson on Luke-Acts plus some freeze-dried stories we got out of a book. They want food for their hearts. They want help for their souls. They want to see Jesus, or at least someone who knows Jesus, and God help us if we offer them less than that.

The last movement I want to talk about is the movement from overfamiliarity to reverence for God. The new science has taught us that we do not know as much as we thought we knew. There is coherence to the universe we may never understand and mystery that goes way, way deeper than the stars. At home by my bed I have a book called *The Physics of Immortality*. In it, Tulane cosmologist Frank Tipler declares that—quite by accident—science led him straight to God. He is not the only one who has said so, which is, frankly, awesome. Science and theology have been divorced since the seventeenth century, when Newton suggested that math ran the universe, not God. Now mathematical physicists are telling us it just is not so and a rapprochement is underway.

What is going on is a reunion of cosmic proportions. Science and theology have traveled so far away from each other that they are coming back together again, and we are lucky enough to see it happening. Historian Morris Berman calls it the “re-enchantment of the world,” or at least that is what he hopes it is—a return to what we knew before the scientific revolution persuaded us we did not, namely, that we are part of a cosmos we are not in charge of, a living system that invites us to participate, not dominate. Dominion belongs to God alone.

I do not know how all of this affects you, but it makes me think we have gotten a little too chummy with God. Tune in to many of our churches on Sunday mornings and you will hear preachers speaking of God as they would speak of a pet lion—oh, he was fierce once, but there is nothing to be afraid of now. You can climb on his back if you want to. We’ve had all his teeth and claws pulled so he can’t hurt you anymore.

If you do not know Annie Dillard’s work, you should. There is a fine passage in her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, about how blithely we invoke the power of God. “It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church,” she writes; “we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may awake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”¹

She goes on to tell the story of the Hasidic rabbi who refused to promise a friend he would visit the next day. “How could you ask me to make such a promise?” he asked

his friend. "This evening I must pray and recite, 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.' When I say these words, my soul goes out to the utmost rim of life....Perhaps I shall not die this time either, but how can I now promise to do something...after the prayer?"

How long has it been since you worried about dying at your prayers? Not because your cholesterol finally got you but because God heard you and came to meet you face to face? It has been a long time for me, but I am at least smarter than my friends who are always telling God they are ready for anything God wants them to do. "O God," I pray, "I know you have lots of other things to do, so it's fine with me if you want to move me down your list. I've got plenty to do here, more than enough, really, and I'm not sure I'm up to a direct encounter."

I have read my Bible. I know what happens to people who see God face to face, and it seems to me that we are a little short on reverence these days. We say God's name out loud without even bowing. We talk about what God thinks and wants as if we knew what that was. We speak of God's love as if it were all soft pillows when it is more like bone-melting thunder. "Love in action," says Father Zossima in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, "is a harsh and dreadful thing, compared with love in dreams."

Again, this shift will take place first in the mind of the preacher, whose reverence for God may lead her to say less, not more, about God's ultimate being and doing. Robert Farrar Capon uses an apt metaphor in this regard. When we try to describe God, he says, we are like oysters trying to describe a ballerina. In the end, we may only be able to describe what we love, substituting psalms for expositions.

The next millennium is less than four years away. By chance or by plan, it coincides with a major shift in human consciousness. As treasurers of God's word, we have the very great privilege of deciding how we will respond to that shift—or more pertinently, how we will take part in it—by perceiving and proclaiming the new things God is doing in our sight.

NOTES

¹ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1982), 40-41