

Postmodern Preaching: Learning to Love the Thickness of the Text

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Last summer I attempted to read the Koran, the holy book of Moslems. After all, we are having an increasing number of Moslems on campus and what better way to understand a faith than to read its texts? For starters I discovered that one cannot really read the Koran in English. There are English translations, to be sure, but none of these is recognized as scripture. The only true Koran is in Arabic. One must learn Arabic in order to read the true Koran. Odd that Christians have not put similar linguistic restraints upon the reading of our texts.

Despite my earnest efforts, I didn't make it through the Koran. For one thing, Mohammed got on my nerves. Mohammed, the prophet of the one true God, has an opinion on everything. How to weigh grain. How to cut meat. Homosexuality (he is against it). I bogged down in the eight pages or so on women during their menstrual cycles. It really is amazing how many issues there are in which Jesus appears to have had absolutely no interest. And we can all be thankful for that.

For another thing, Mohammed never tells stories. Ask him a question, he gives you a straight answer. "I have three things I want to say about how to run a government....," he will say. Quite a contrast with Jesus' telling Peter to go get tax money out of the mouth of a fish. Mohammed always answers every question. Jesus, almost never. The Koran has a low tolerance for ambiguity, narrative, enigma; the Bible wallows in it.

When one reads the Koran, one knows immediately why there are "Moslem fundamentalists."¹ Yet it is more difficult to understand why there are those who read say, the Gospel of Luke, and find therein "fundamentals." Luke is "thick," the literature is polyvalent, predominately narrative, almost never propositional, open to multiple interpretations, defying reductionistic reading. In fact, after a few weeks into the Koran, switching back to Luke, the reader is apt to feel that the biblical texts are almost intentionally obscure, more difficult and strange than they need to be.² The thick, impenetrable nature of these texts may be by conscious design. A hard to understand text catches our attention, begs for attention, engages our natural human inclination to figure things out. On the other hand, the texts may be difficult, obscure, and distant simply because they are talking about what is true whereas most of what we live is false. A living, righteous, prickly God tends to produce difficult scripture.³

For instance, this Easter many of us will struggle with John 20. John first does the story of Easter as a footrace between the disciples in which they came, then they "saw and believed" (John 20:8). Believed what? John says that "as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead" (20:9). Presumably, they believed that the body had been stolen. Or maybe they believed something else, such as the return of the robin in the spring or the emergence of the butterfly from the cocoon. At any rate, whatever they believed was not yet quite Easter. Easter ends with everyone going back home (20:10) and that was that. At least the *men* go home. Mary stays behind to weep. She is confronted by the Risen Christ, whom she regards as

either the gardener or a body snatcher, or perhaps both (20:15).

Then, just to keep things interesting, John 20:19 begins Easter all over again with the story of Thomas and his doubts. Defying resolution or simple understanding, the Risen Christ appears again in John 21 in a complex, utterly enigmatic appearance which becomes quite convoluted with details of fish, fishing nets, Peter, and feeding sheep.

We have a “problem” with this literature. Our problem is not, as we sometimes flatter ourselves into believing, that we are modern, critical, and skeptical whereas the text is naive, primitive, and credulous. That was historical-criticism’s reading of our interpretive dilemma. Fortunately, we now know what simplistic, reductionistic and historically naive readings historical-criticism rendered.⁴

No, I have come to believe that our problem is that we have become tone-deaf to a text so thick, so opaque, so rich as John 20-21. We are ill-equipped to hear the Easter text. After all, we are modern, Western folk who have taught ourselves to be content with a flat, well-defined, and utterly accessible world. Our world has become “user friendly,” for we can imagine no world worth having which is not subject to our utility. Our ways of knowing are positivistic, historicist, and inherently reductionistic.⁵

In thinking about Easter, Bishop John Spong asked a public radio interviewer, “How can my daughter, who is earning her Ph.D. in physics, possibly be asked to believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus?”

The answer, I suppose, depends on Spong’s daughter. I have known some rather simpleminded physicists in my time. How little imagination does his daughter now have? Perhaps the story John has to tell is now utterly inaccessible to her. Perhaps, on the other hand, with training and time, she could learn that there is a world which is as yet undreamt of in her philosophy. The text cannot be blamed if modern people (of whom Bishop Spong is among the last holdout) live by epistemologies too limited to enable them to hear the text.

Robert Alter says somewhere that, until the parables of Kafka or James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, there is a sense in which we modern people had lost the skills necessary to read the Bible. Only after artists were again determined to write reality on a number of levels, exploring the complexities of human consciousness, the mystery of time, the polyvalence of words, were we able to ask the right questions of First Kings.⁶

William C. Placher makes the evocative suggestion that the very messiness of the biblical texts — the way they parallel each other, conflict, repeat, fail to connect — is an embodiment of the God which they try to bring to speech. “The narratives of this God who eschews brute force were not edited with the brute force necessary to impose a single, clear framework.”⁷ Just as this God, according to a number of the parables of Jesus, is willing to live with wasted seed, a net full of good and bad fish, and a garden where the weeds mix with the wheat, eschewing violent, coercive purification and harmonizing, so the willingness of the biblical writers and canonizers to live with the messiness of the texts is a testimonial to their faith in a God who chooses to suffer, to embrace human messiness, and to love us in our inconsistency rather than to force us to make sense.

I recently said to a friend who is an expert on Russia, “Things have really become messy over there since the demise of the Soviet Union, what with the breakaway republics, the rebellions, and difficulties.”

He replied, “No. Things were always messy, interesting, and conflicted there,

though for a time Soviet tanks made it seem unified and coherent.”

The modern lust for unity, for a center, for coherence and cohesiveness produced not only perhaps the most violent century the world has ever known but also some of the most dreary centralized governments and collectivist schemes, to say nothing of some of the ugliest architecture. Any century which admires New York’s World Trade Center or the Atlanta Airport will find John 20-21 to be tough going.

The interpretive skills which many of us learned in seminary invariably took a superior stance toward the text; modernity is inherently arrogant. We have been conditioned to feel that we moderns are privileged to stand at the summit of human development, uniquely equipped to stand in judgement upon any idea or anyone who preceded us. All knowing is tied to some scheme of power and, in a capitalistic, democratic culture, all knowing begins and ends with the sovereign consumer. So we ask, “What does this text mean to me?” or more precisely, “What can I *do* with this text?” before simply sitting quietly and letting the text have its way with us.

We cut apart the text, split it up into its smallest units, sever it from the community which produced it, lop off that which offends our modern sensibilities — my verbs are intentional. We are doing the same violence to the text which we do to any culture or people who are strange to us, who don’t fit into the categories which we received from the Enlightenment, who refuse to produce the commodities we value.⁸

Much of our violence begins with our modern lust for the one “right” interpretation, the one official reading.⁹ All interpretation, including historical-criticism (*especially* historical criticism) serves some configuration of power, some social arrangement. I once thought it shameful that “uninformed” laypersons were busy interpreting biblical texts in all sorts of ways, without the benefit of academic training. I now honor such diversity of readings — particularly when they occur among folk who are not only seeking to understand the text but to embody and perform the text — as ecclesial resistance against the powers-that-be who serve the academy rather than the church.

What I am pleading for here is an interpretive approach to our scripture which is true to the form of the scripture itself. Just as the Koran, by its very form, renders certain kinds of readers, so the Bible, by its form, is more congenial to certain interpretive strategies than to others.

So when a bright young thing emerged from Duke Chapel complaining that, “Your sermon today was hard to follow. It didn’t seem well organized. What was the point?” I of course responded, “Well, I did better than Mark does. At least mine had a beginning and an end which is more than you can say for his Gospel.”

The text itself encourages, provokes uncentering, dislocation, and dislodgement. The very thickness of the text may be part of the text’s strategic assault upon our received world.

I think we need to condition our people to expect interpretive difficulty on Sunday morning, to relish the multiplicity of messages, to love the thickness of the text, to come to church expecting to have their present reality subverted by the demanding text. Too many of us preachers say, after reading a troublesome text, “Give me twenty minutes and I will explain this for you.” Even to read a troublesome text and then to say, in a well-modulated voice, “Now I have three things I want to say about this,” begins to defuse the text, make it make sense without allowing the text time to make us make sense. To be baptized is to be willing to let the text stand in a superior

interpretive position to us, not the other way around. Rather than treating the text like a cadaver to be dissected, we ought to pray with the psalmist, "O Lord, thou has searched me and known me."

This stress upon the plurality of meanings, the thickness of the text, the surplus of textual significance may sound woefully relativistic and slippery, imagination out of control. Have we jointed forces with the postmodernists who believe that there is no reality other than the text? We part company with Derrida and other postmodernists who seem to believe that there is only text (modernism is always asserting that things are *only* one thing or another), that there can be no external referent to the text.¹⁰ We Christians really do believe that behind these texts stands the Risen Christ, that these texts eventually render a living God who has graciously chosen to be revealed in these texts. To be a baptized Christian is to be someone who is busy believing that these seemingly disordered, often exasperating, sometimes threatening texts ultimately have portrayed the true God truthfully. In fact, over time, many of us come to believe that these texts are true to the living God of Israel precisely because they are so seemingly disordering, exasperating, and threatening.

Does this relativize interpretation, making all interpretations of scripture equally valid? What about the objective truth of the text? Is it all as slippery and ill-defined as this?

Even to ask such questions betrays our unwillingness to relax, to let down our defenses, and to let the text have its way with us. Where did we get the notion that truth must be "objectively true," or that truth ought not be "relative?" Where did we get the notion that it is possible for something not to be relative? Even to use the word "relative" is to assume that there is some freestanding, self-contained reality out there somewhere which has freed itself from the contingencies of history and relationship to anything other than itself. Modernity hoped to uncover objective truth by grounding its epistemology in a universal account of human rationality. Truth, to be true to modernity, had to be collectivist, large, unified, logical (as the Enlightenment defined logic), so logical that no thinking human being could resist it without being subhuman. Ours has been an age eager to label those who put forward other accounts of truth as "primitive," "tribalistic," "fanatical," or "subhuman." The gulag, Hitler's ovens, and the extermination of Native Americans were grounded in an epistemology which believed that truth was universally, objectively valid.¹¹

If you think that truth has to be consistent, or universally valid, or objectively true or some other nonbiblical definition of true, then you ought to go worship that definition of truth and not bother with trying truthfully to serve the Trinity. If your truth must be served up as first principles, foundational insights, or universally valid propositions, then you need not bother with the text which we call scripture which claims that all the truth we need has met us in a Jew from Nazareth.

Now the truth can be told. For us Christians, all truth is "relative," relative to this Jew named Jesus. We really do not know what the world is, much less where it is headed, until we know him. Jesus does not start with abstract propositions which are alleged to be universally valid, objectively true, or other such external prior conceptions of truth. Rather, he begins with the truth which is a person, personal, embodied, and enacted. "*I am the way, the truth and the life,*" he says (John 14:6). *I am truth.* Therefore he is able to define what is true, not by arguing that certain aspects of the Kingdom are congruent with what we think truth to be, but rather by parable,

pronouncement, and enactment of that truth which is God's Kingdom. "The Kingdom of God is like...."

For us, Easter is not true because it "really happened" or it is "historically true," or "true to our experience of the presence of Christ," though it may indeed be all of that. We must not begin with our categories of what Easter would need to be if it were to be judged by us as true. Our lust for absolute, irrefutable truth is somehow tied to our modern attempt to define and thereby to harness and to wield absolute power. As Susan Bordo has shown, the Enlightenment arose, in great part, out of a profound anxiety about certitude. We wanted sure, self-derived, objective knowledge and devised an epistemology which would deliver it to us.¹² This was the counterpart of the Baconian attempt to understand in order to control. Yet Easter, by its very nature, is not something we can grasp or control (recall John 20:11-18 where the Risen Christ frustrates Mary's attempt to "hold on to me"). The very diversity of the texts about Easter is testimony to disciples who had their categories and concepts, their very world disrupted by resurrection. They struggle to bring to speech that which their language was inept at describing. The creativity and intensity of their linguistic struggle is testimony to its credibility.

Easter is true because the text says it is true, because what the text says is true to the church's continuing engagement by the living Christ. It requires, not certitude, the sure fixing of truth, but rather trust, a playful willingness to let the strangeness of the text have its way with us.¹³ The text has subsumed us into itself, rendered unto us a world which would have been unavailable to us without the world having been constructed (as most worlds are) by the text. Yet that does not mean that the world rendered thereby exists only in the imagination of the text. Every time the church gathers, breaks the bread and drinks the wine, we proclaim to any who dare to listen, that what the text says, is. The text, we believe, has the power to evoke that which it describes.

We have the text, we believe, as a gracious gift of a God determined not to leave us to our own devices. What happened on Easter, namely, Jesus coming back to us, refusing to leave us alone, intruding among us, is what happens each Sunday in the reading and preaching of the text. Scripture, read and preached, is Easter all over again. And, thank God, we never exhaust the significance of it, despite our most thorough interpretive efforts, for the text and the world it renders is thick. There is always a surplus of meaning, even after the longest of our sermons.

Thus John ends his account (at least *one* of his accounts) of Easter by preaching, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31).

NOTES

¹ The term "Moslem fundamentalists" appears to be a creation of the Western press to explain why there are some people who take their religion very seriously in a world where most of us in the West do not. *All* Moslems interpret their texts in ways which the West might label as "fundamentalist." My point here is that the texts themselves beg for this sort of reading.

² I suppose it was Wittgenstein who was among the first moderns to notice that biblical texts appear to be almost intentionally opaque. Why is it that the biblical authors want to communicate, yet also want to

be difficult? Might it be that the authors want to do something to the texts' readers (hearers) through the very difficulty of the texts? Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans Peter Winch, ed G H Von Wright (Oxford Basil Blackwell, 1980)

³ Luther delightfully complains about the prophets who, to the father of the modern German language, have a "queer way of talking, like people who, instead of proceeding in an orderly manner, ramble off from one thing to the next, so that you cannot make head or tail of them or see what they are getting at " Quoted in Gerhard von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets* (New York Harper & Row, 1967), 15

⁴ See Walter Brueggemann's "Preaching As Reimagination," *Theology Today* (October 1995) 313-329 for a wonderfully concise rendering of his continuing quarrel with historical-criticism

⁵ In his now notorious defense of historical-criticism in *The Interpreters' Dictionary of the Bible* (1962) 1 431, Krister Stendahl contended that we preachers must answer to the objective, dispassionate, honest work of the not-necessarily-believing-anything "descriptive biblical theologian " Fortunately, James Sanders corrected Stendahl's hermeneutical naivete in his article, "Hermeneutics," in *The Interpreters' Dictionary of the Bible The Supplementary Volume* (1976), 402-407, in which Sanders drops the pretense to scientific objectivity, urging us to approach the text with humility and humor

⁶ Here I commend Susan Handelman's *The Slayers of Moses* (Albany, N Y State University of New York Press, 1982) Handelman praises the traditional rabbinical methods of biblical interpretation which relished the endlessness of interpretive possibilities and which loved certain biblical texts precisely because they were so impervious to "right" readings

⁷ William C Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God Christ, Theology and Scripture* (Louisville Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995), 88

⁸ Alas, much of the "hermeneutics of suspicion," particularly the type practiced by feminists like Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza *In Memory of Her A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York Crossroad, 1983) is not nearly suspicious enough of its own subservience to the epistemologies of the Enlightenment A reductionistic reading of texts in favor of "liberation" or some other unifying prior principle can be an unwarranted coercion of the odd voice of the text It is easier to see the cultural conditioning of the text than acknowledge our own

⁹ Placher recalls the remarkable story of Bishop Theodoret's suppression (A D 423) of Tatian's *Diatessaron* The book was Tatian's attempt to harmonize the four Gospels into one Despite the way Theodoret went about it, the bishop was right in defending the diversity and difficulty of the interpretation represented by our having four Gospels rather than one *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, 86-87

¹⁰ See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976)

¹¹ See Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed (Notre Dame University of Notre Dame press, 1984) and Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! an Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia Westminster, 1982)

¹² Susan Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity* Especially, see Walter Brueggemann's explication of this theme in the first chapter of his *Texts Under Negotiation The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis Fortress, 1993)

¹³ See David J Bryant, *Faith and the Play of Imagination On the Role of Imagination in Religion* (Macon Mercer University Press, 1989)