

Reclaiming Preaching as Spiritual Gift at the Approach of the New Millennium

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It is a watershed day in the life of any preacher when he or she discovers that preaching is not a do-it-yourself project. It is possible, of course, for a person to give self-generated speeches on religious subjects, and these speeches may be fine examples of rhetoric. They may be based on texts from scripture, well-researched, skillfully crafted, and artfully presented. They may entertain, instruct, and motivate those who hear them; they may even fill church pews with eager listeners. However, giving such speeches is not the same thing as preaching the word of God.

To stand before a group of people and dare to say, not only, “Thus *said* the Lord,” but also “Thus *says* the Lord” is an awe-inspiring thing. It implies that the preacher has not only heard a historical word about God but that somehow the preacher has heard a message from God intended for the community of believers gathered before God in that particular place on that particular day. This kind of preaching comes only as a gift of the Spirit and involves us in a collaborative relationship¹ with the God whose word we preach.

Another way to approach this understanding of preaching is to reflect on a story from the desert tradition:

Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, “Abba, as far as I can, I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace and as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?” Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands toward heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, “If you will, you can become all flame.”²

I don’t fully understand this story, but it speaks to me of what can happen when preachers are available both to God and to the people to whom they are preaching. Anyone who has a facility with words can give a religious speech. Becoming transparent to the Word of God is a different matter. The preacher is called to be by God’s grace a kind of burning bush, getting peoples’ attention so God can speak to them.

Just as his encounter with I AM at the burning bush transformed Moses’ life, so should preaching be radically transformative. It is the proclamation of the Word of God to the end that both the preacher and the congregation are transformed into the image of Christ, and also to the end that even the world somehow is drawn closer to what God intended it to be. James Forbes draws on Ezekiel’s image of the valley of dry bones to talk about transformative preaching as an exercise in raising the dead.³ The need of both preacher and congregation is not just for a little ethical and theological tweaking. Something in us is dead and must be resurrected. It is a miracle that somehow the Spirit moves in preaching so that people are set free from their spiritual deadness and come to a powerful, life-giving knowledge of God.

This is not just an intellectual knowing. It is closer to what the Bible means when

it says that “Adam knew his wife” (Gen.4:1). It is an intimate and immanent relationship that impacts every area of a person’s life and has the power to transform the very core of the personality.

Phillips Brooks is said to have remarked that preaching can be like delivering lectures on medicine to sick people. Lectures on medicine are not bad things; they may help people understand their condition better and become more informed consumers of medical services. However, when my arm is broken, I want and need something a little more effective than a lecture. I need treatment that will set me on the way to being healed. God can use faithful preaching to heal and empower God’s people, individually and collectively, so that they can live faithfully as witness and disciples in the world. While it is generally true that God can use a sharp tool better than a dull one, this kind of transformation in people and churches does not happen only as a result of the scholarship, wit, and hard work of the preacher. No matter how well you can translate Greek and Hebrew, how many good commentaries you read, how much exegetical study you do, or how talented a speaker you are, people will not be transformed into the image of Christ unless the Spirit of God moves in the writing of the sermon and in the preaching event.

A Prayer for the Preacher

The following prayer has been my close companion in the writing and delivering of sermons for more than a decade. I offer these four petitions, and the reflections that accompany them, as a way to think and pray theologically about preaching as spiritual gift.⁴

1. God, give me the words.

Yes, on any given day with enough time to study, I could probably come up with enough generally applicable words drawn from an assigned scripture text to fill up a twenty-minute sermon slot. However my desire is that the congregation hear, not just the word in general, one-size-fits-all, but God’s word for them. While I can have a sense of the needs of the people, I cannot see into the secret places of their hearts and know their deepest needs at that particular time. And if I am a guest preacher, it is difficult for me to know in any depth the corporate issues and needs of the body of Christ gathered in that place. So preaching becomes an exercise in discernment, and I am dependent on the Holy Spirit to guide both the words that I say and how those words are heard by the people. (Anyone who has preached for a while knows that these two things are not necessarily the same.)

In his commentary on the book of Romans, John Calvin points out that without the work of the Holy Spirit, effective preaching is not possible. In and of itself “the voice of man [sic] can by no means penetrate the soul; and mortal man [sic] would be too much exalted were he said to have the power to regenerate us... ”⁵ Calvin knew that while human preachers may out of their own resources produce words, the word of life comes from somewhere else.

Reclaiming preaching as spiritual gift has involved me in an on-going discipline of learning to trust God. It has made me vulnerable and challenged my need to be in control. Like Jacob, I have wrestled long and hard with God over the control of “my” sermons, especially around the issue of when the sermon finally comes together. This has involved doing my homework and then waiting for the Lord (and waiting and

waiting and waiting) in fear and trembling while confronting my dread that when 11:00 a.m. on Sunday morning rolls around, I will have nothing to say.

To pray “give me the words” is to remind ourselves that we are not ultimately in control of the preaching event. It puts us in a posture of need and humility before the God who promises to give the Kingdom to the poor and the Spirit to those who ask (Luke 11:13). It calls us to let go of something we care about very much in the hope that God will indeed be faithful. Many times I have reflected on the story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac in regard to the call to preach. Abraham was asked to offer up the means by which the promise of God to him would be fulfilled in obedience to the God of the promise. He was able to do this because he trusted that “The Lord will provide” (Gen. 22:14). We are called to take our exegesis, reflections, and ideas and offer them to God, realizing that as good as they may seem to us, they are not yet a sermon. They will only preach when God has breathed life into them. We cannot control this process. We cannot make it happen. We can only open ourselves to the movement of the Spirit, trust the promise, and wait upon the Lord.

2. Gather a congregation and open the people to hear your word.

Being a Calvinist, I believe that left to their own devices, most people will probably choose to go somewhere other than church on Sunday morning. To pray that God would draw a congregation together is to take seriously the biblical teaching that it is God who creates the *koinonia*. People don’t just decide to show up; God brings them together for a purpose. And to do this, God must overcome many obstacles that would keep people away. This applies especially to those who are outside the church, those who are hurting, and those who are struggling between belief and unbelief. Often it seems that the people who need God the most are least likely to darken the door of the church. To pray that God would bring the people God wants to be in the congregation that day is to take the side of such people, often totally unknown to us, against the powers and principalities that would keep them from finding the gate of the sheepfold where “they may come in and go out and find pasture” (Jn.10:9).

Even if people do make it through the doors and into a pew, there is still much that militates against their hearing the word of life. First, there is the spiritual blindness and hardness of heart that are natural to our human condition. No matter how wonderful the sermon might be, if there is no openness to it on the receiving end, it will come to little. This was Jesus’ experience, according to Mark’s gospel, when he came to Nazareth and preached to the people among whom he had grown up. There was no openness to Jesus or to his message. Instead the hearers responded, “ ‘Where did this man get all this?’ ... And they took offense at him” (Mk 6:2,3). Mark ends this sad story by saying that even Jesus was stymied by their unbelief and could do no great works there.

Another way to think about this is to see preaching as the preparation and serving of a spiritual meal. Even the most delicious food in the world will be of little use if it is set before people who are not hungry. It is humbling to realize that we cannot make people hungry for the word. We cannot control how the sermon will be received. To pray that God would make the people open and hungry, is to realize that we are doubly dependent on God: first to open us to hear the message, then to open the people so that they can receive it. In speaking of the conversion of Lydia through Paul’s preaching, Calvin says that although Lydia was undoubtedly a pious woman,

she could not understand the preaching of the Gospel without the illumination of the Spirit.... Luke means not only that Lydia was moved by the inspiration of the Spirit to embrace the Gospel with a feeling of the heart, but that her mind was illuminated to understand....[for] preaching on its own is nothing else but a dead letter.⁶

Along with our natural human resistance to the gospel, the preacher must also realize that we all live in the midst of a faith-denying culture. Our people leave the sanctuary each week to live for the next six days in a culture that is basically materialist. They live in a world that defines and values them in terms of how they look, how much they have, what kind of car they drive, how much success they have achieved, and dozens of other things that have nothing to do with their identity as children of God. They are constantly bombarded with messages telling them that the really important things in life are those gotten by earning and spending. When people come to church and sit in the pew to worship, all this faith-denying baggage and all these skewed priorities that come with them constitute a major obstacle to their hearing the gospel. So it is that we must pray for God to open people to the word, for preaching is effective only to the degree that the Holy Spirit removes the obstacles that are present in all of us. As Calvin remarked, those who think otherwise do not “sufficiently know the darkness of the human mind.”⁷

3. Preach this sermon through me.

No matter how good the manuscript or outline of a sermon may be, it is the actual preaching of it that counts. To pray “preach this sermon through me” is to affirm both that God is the prime mover in preaching and also that our humanness is the medium through which God chooses to communicate.

In *The Holy Spirit and Preaching*, James Forbes explores the concept of anointing by the Holy Spirit as a way of getting at God’s involvement in the preaching event. In this context anointing means that the power of the Spirit is poured out on both preacher and congregation in such a way that the life-giving word takes its full effect. When a preacher is under obedience to the Spirit and has opened himself or herself to the Spirit’s power in preaching, says Forbes,

... our faculties are enhanced beyond natural abilities. The word of God is quickened to accomplish its regenerating, healing, edifying, sanctifying objectives. And those ministered to are invested with a God-consciousness, a spiritual enlivening, and an interest in [responding to] the life and ministry of the Anointed One [Jesus].⁸

To pray to be anointed for preaching is to desire that God will be as much in control of the actual preaching event as God was in the preparation of the sermon. It is to pray that God will work in, through, beyond, and even in spite of what we say so that people may hear and respond to the gospel. It is to dare to hope for wisdom beyond our own wisdom, strength beyond our own strength, and guidance beyond what we can understand, not so that we may look good, but so that God might be glorified and the body of Christ built up.

To pray “preach this sermon *through me*” is also to recognize that the persona of

the preacher is a crucial part of the mix of the preaching event. Underneath whatever else happens when the preacher enters the pulpit, at some level people are looking to see whether what the preacher is talking about is real for him or her. Does it make a difference for us? Is there some congruence between what we preach and how we live? In a sense, they are looking to see if we show evidence of having ourselves walked in this strange landscape of faith. Do we show some sign of having spent time with God? Metaphorically speaking, do our faces shine (Ex.34:29-35)?

Tom Long uses the image of preacher as witness to get at this dimension of preaching:

The preacher as witness is not authoritative because of rank or power, but rather because of what the preacher has seen and heard. When the preacher prepares the sermon by wrestling with a biblical text, the preacher is not merely gathering information about the text. The preacher is listening for a voice, looking for a presence, hoping for the claim of God to be encountered through the text. Until this happens, there is nothing for the preacher to say. When it happens, the preacher becomes a witness to what has been seen and heard through scripture, and the preacher's authority grows out of seeing and hearing.⁹

It is a sad fact that the demands of parish ministry often militate against the kinds of practices that keep us in touch with the presence of God. In *Fundamentals of Preaching*, John Killinger takes note of the crushing demands of ministry and then observes,

This is why it is so imperative for the minister to have a disciplined life of prayer and Bible study, of meditation and reading in the great devotional literature of the ages. Otherwise the sense of awe and mystery which first commanded his or her entrance into the ministry will be forgotten in the rush of daily affairs and the note of spiritual excitement will be hushed in both sermon and conversation. The great passion of the faith will be ground under the heel of mundane demands.¹⁰

4. *Help me to let go of the sermon and trust that you will make it bear fruit.*

After the blood, sweat, and tears of writing and preaching a sermon, many of us find it hard to let go when it is over. Few indeed are the preachers who have not spent Sunday afternoon beating themselves up because of the stinker they inflicted on the congregation that morning. If the sermon happened to be one that we thought was good, then the temptation is to hold onto it and pretend that it belongs to us.

It is a productive discipline for preachers to practice letting go of our sermons, the good, the bad, and the mediocre, soon after they are preached. Doing this, on the one hand, subdues our pride and on the other, trains us to trust that God can make use of even our worst efforts. The image of the treasure in the clay jars (II Cor.4:7) has been helpful to me here. We are not the treasure. We are the clay jar, and as such we can expect that both we and our sermons will be less than perfect. In fact, it can be a very freeing thing to realize that we are not called to be perfect. Perfection is not in the nature of clay jars. Our call is to be available to the God who is the treasure. Whenever

the treasure shows up in the clay jar, we can be sure it is a gift of the Spirit.

The discipline of letting go of the sermon involves trusting that whether we did well or badly on any given day, over time God will use faithful preaching to shape the life of the congregation and to make disciples out of its hearers. We can have the grace to let go and offer the sermon back to God as we claim the promise that

as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring
forth and sprout...
so shall my word be that goes out of my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Is. 55:10,11)

My suspicion is that crossing the imaginary divide of the new millennium will make very little real difference to most people or most preachers. The preaching task on January 7, 2001, will be much the same as it was on December 31, 2000. There is no denying, however, that preaching in our time is extremely challenging and likely to become more so. I would suggest that perhaps the most helpful thing we as preachers can do during this time of challenge and change is to reclaim preaching as spiritual gift. By this I mean understanding and practicing preaching as something that comes to us by the grace of God and moves through us by the power of God to the end that God's people might receive the gift of abundant life.

This is not to deny that preaching is also a craft and one at which we must work diligently. Anyone who does less insults God and cheats the congregation. However, the wisdom of our tradition, the testimony of scripture, and the experience of many preaching today point us beyond understanding preaching as a craft alone to understanding it also as an intimate, spiritual collaboration between God, the preacher, and the congregation.¹¹ Such preaching, anointed by the Spirit of God, has the power to bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, and set the prisoners free (Is. 61:1). Why should we settle for anything less?

Notes

¹ James Forbes, *The Holy Spirit and Preaching* (Nashville. Abingdon, 1989), 80-82.

² Roberta Bondi, *To Pray and to Love* (Minneapolis. Fortress, 1991), 7

³ *Holy Spirit and Preaching*, 55-64.

⁴ While the reflections accompanying this prayer are my own, the prayer itself came from somewhere else. Unfortunately over the years my memory of its origin have grown vague. After much research I have not been able to find it in print, therefore, I regret I must leave it unattributed.

⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948).

⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, ed David and Thomas Torrance, trans John W. Fraser (Edinburgh Oliver and Boyd, 1966), 73

⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids. Eerdmans, 1948), 131.

⁸ *The Holy Spirit and Preaching*, 54

⁹ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville. Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 44.

¹⁰ John Killinger, *Fundamentals of Preaching* (Minneapolis. Fortress, 1996), 201

¹¹ *The Holy Spirit and Preaching*, 55-64