

The Sense of the Text: *An Invitation to Lenten Preaching*

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In church, especially in a church that stands in the Reformed tradition as mine does, words are important. People come to church during Lent, as during every season, expecting words. They expect words spoken as prayer, words sung as hymns, words preached in sermons interpreting the Word of God.

However, one Palm Sunday several Lenten seasons ago in the congregation I serve, Luke's Passion account was dramatized in mime, not read using words. For several weeks beforehand, a nun from a nearby Catholic university had rehearsed a handful of willing congregation members as they prepared for the demanding task of interpreting Jesus' betrayal, trial, and death through wordless gesture. I was occasionally present for the rehearsals; I watched and felt a growing spiritual power as the actors' movements took on insightful and profound nuances; and, thus, I found myself impaled on a thorny homiletic dilemma.

To preach or not to preach?

On the one hand, I was keenly aware of the danger of sloshing a bucketful of preacherly words over the enacted drama and thereby quenching its power. A part of me felt that the most faithful thing I could do as a preacher that Palm Sunday morning would be to sit down so the congregation might ponder in silence the power of what they had just experienced.

On the other hand, I was also aware of another danger, the danger of keeping the events which the mime portrayed distant, "on stage" in the chancel, detached from the lives of the congregation who, having witnessed the drama of Jesus' Passion enacted, might nevertheless be inclined to waltz blithely out of church and into the spring sunlight to brunch or yard work, as if Luke's drama and Christ's crucifixion had nothing to do with real life.

I chose to preach.

Although even now, several years later, I'm not at all sure that I made the more faithful choice, I chose to use words, praying as I did so that the words of my sermon would link hands with the sensuousness of Luke's story, deepening the power of the One who is God with us, present in our most unfaithful and terrifying moments, working our redemption, resurrecting us into new life.

Most Sundays, that's what you and I do. We use words. This is what our congregations expect and what we have been called to do as preachers. Yet the Lenten texts that circle our way on the liturgical carousel of Year C are profoundly sensuous. The texts themselves invite us to be both modest and brave in the use of our words. To the extent that we are able to do so, our preaching opens the way for the senses of the texts to link hands with the senses of the congregations to whom we preach to the end that, by God's grace, the Word is revealed in all its powerful sensuousness during this

season of Lent.

A Season of Silence - Luke 4:1-13 (Mark 1:12-13)

The Senses

Silence provides the palette for vivid sensuous experiences of God, and in church, we generally don't get enough of it. Often, the lack of silence in church is the direct fault of us preachers who in our constant liturgical chatter seem of all people to be most fearful of what God might say to us were we simply to be still and listen.

Inviting silence into the worship experience begins with the commitment of the preacher to invite silence into his or her personal life, I think. Once we have made friends with silence in our personal lives, then it becomes easier, natural even, to move liturgically away from quickie "now let us confess our sins silently and personally" addenda to the real (that is, the written and spoken) prayers of confession toward larger chunks of prayerful silence. Congregations long for silence like this during worship, I have found. When given fair warning that it's going to happen, they welcome it. At first there will likely be restless rustling in the pews, but given time and experience with this, the silence builds and reaches a kind of silent holy crescendo. If a baby cries, it seems not an interruption or a distraction, but a vivid and sensuous expression of God with us.

And then there is the matter of silence in the preaching event itself. In *Ordinary Resurrections*, Jonathan Kozol writes about the preaching of the Rev. Martha Overall, Mother Martha to the children and parishioners of St. Ann's Episcopal Church in the South Bronx:

The pastor holds two services and gives two sermons Sunday morning, one in English, one in Spanish. She stays up late on Saturdays to write her sermons, which are crafted carefully, but not ornate, and seldom driven by exaggerated rhythms of rhetorical momentum. There are even silences at times, not big ones—hesitations really—when she's talking to the congregation. I don't know if they're intentional; and, if I asked, I think that she'd deny this. But they do have an effect. They seem to open up some "space." That's just about the only way I can describe it.

I know nothing of theology; but it occurs to me that modest hesitations—normal ones, like those in ordinary conversations—may allow a bit more space than a relentless speaking style does for people in a congregation who may feel the world has tried to clip their wings and that the powers and principalities of their society might actually prefer it if they didn't fly too high.

This idea of leaving, or permitting, open spaces that another person, who has never been to college or to seminary, has an opportunity to fill is not something that the priest has ever spoken of. If I actually did question her, I'm sure she'd tell me not to read so deeply into random hesitations on a morning when she's simply tired or distracted. Still, I think it does reflect an aspect of her personality and represents, even unconsciously, an element of pedagogic style that may have an unexpectedly empowering effect.

Whether on a weekday morning in a fourth-grade classroom or on Sunday in the sanctuary of a church, I think that passages of normal hesitation and, at times, a searching pause that speaks of a respect for silence can accomplish things that flashier and more inexorable performances cannot.¹

The Sermon

Do you think that Jesus wanted to head out into the wilderness? I don't think he wanted to go there at all. Reading Luke's version of it, one might think so, for Luke writes that Jesus was "led" into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit, which in my mind conjures up a picture of a dewy-eyed child trustingly placing his hand into the hand of a buxom, motherly Holy Spirit or maybe one of those trust walks that you sometimes do in small groups at a youth conference where one person bandages her eyes with a scarf tied tight enough so that she can't see a thing and then allows her partner to be her "eyes," trusting him to lead her first to the cool shade of the dark green forest and then to sit on a rock where he unbuckles her sandals and swishes water from the lake on her bare feet.

Mark tells the story differently. Mark writes that the Spirit "drove" Jesus into the wilderness. The Spirit *drove* Jesus into the wilderness, which makes me think not of a white dove rippling the air above Jesus' head, but a huge black raven swooping down on Jesus, flapping its wings with tornado-like fury, picking Jesus up in its needle-sharp beak by the tag of his robe, and dropping him with a thud in the middle of the desert.

Do you think Jesus headed out into the desert because he wanted to go there? I don't. I don't think he wanted to go there at all because, after all, it was really, really quiet and there were no people in the desert and Jesus was definitely a people person. You get the feeling from reading the gospel according to Luke that Luke was probably a people person, too, because Luke goes to great lengths in his gospel to make sure his readers know that Jesus was forever going to parties or out to dinner and he wasn't too picky about whom he went to dinner with—sometimes it was the Pharisees and sometimes it was the tax collectors; as long as there was a group of people ready to pop the cork on a bottle of wine and pass around the olives and the pita bread, he was the one everyone could count on to have a AAA travel book in his backpack, marked with recommendations for the restaurants with the best food, the liveliest conversation, the loudest music.

I rather doubt that Jesus, who thrived on people and on people noise, wanted to head to the wilderness where it was quiet, oh so quiet. I don't think he wanted to go there at all.

It could be, however, that my sense about Jesus not wanting to head to the wilderness has more to do with me than it does with Jesus or Luke or Mark. You've read the same research I have: about how noisy our culture is, how in the average home the TV is turned on more than seven hours per day with each individual watching television for about four-and-a-half hours. Personally, when I've heard or read research like this, I've always felt slightly superior to the "average" person in the "average" home. I read books, two newspapers almost every day, and on the days that I don't have time to read every editorial and op-ed piece, there is NPR.

But then I read something that pulled me up short: how Bruce Forbes, a professor of religious studies and the co-chair of the "Religion and Popular Culture" program unit of the American Academy of the Religion (a scholar, in other words, who probably

reads tons more books than I do, three newspapers every day, and I wouldn't be surprised if he were one of those guest contributors on NPR), decided to chronicle his own behavior, and when he did, he discovered that he did indeed watch at least four hours of television a day—while he dressed, ate, relaxed, and “needed” the news.²

Having read about Forbes' exercise, I decided to chronicle my own behavior and what I discovered really stunned me. The TV is on a lot at my house. The *Today Show* is on while I dress. When I get home from the church on Wednesday evenings, I have my dinner with a little *Law and Order* served up on the side. I follow that with the ten o'clock news, and I'm lulled to sleep by Jay Leno's monologue.

And what I discovered when I found out how much of this electronic noise is in my life is that I have to admit I like it. I really do. I thought about all this noise and what it would be like simply to turn off all that noise and be alone in the quiet, the oh-so-quiet desert of my existence. It was a daunting thought, the thought of all that silence, and I didn't want to go there.

So maybe that is really why I think Jesus didn't want to head out into the quiet of the desert. I think Jesus didn't want to go there because I don't. In the silence, I'm not able to be distracted from the dark side of who I am. In the silence, I have to do battle with noisy demons that tempt me to spend the capital of my God-given life pleasing myself or other people, rather than pleasing God. In the silence, I just might come face to face with God, and who knows what God might ask me to change about my life.

Being in the silence can be a scary thing, but it is an important, a necessary thing, the church has said. For forty days, the church says, we are to observe Lent, a time of desert quiet in our lives. It is, the church maintains, a first step toward repentance, that is, the first move in turning away from everything that keeps us separated from God and our own best selves.

Of course, none of us *has* to do this. No hovering bird of prey is going to swoop down upon us and make us do it. We are free to turn off the TV and be quiet or to grab the remote control and ratchet up the sound and let the noise of secular culture drown out everything else. If we do choose to turn it off, though, we just may find ourselves in the company of Jesus in the silence, and who knows what we may hear.

A Season of Seeing - Luke 13:31-35 (Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17-4:1)

The Senses

On the Sunday when I preached a slightly longer version of the sermon that follows, the prayer of confession was created by an artist member of the congregation who is a photographer specializing in black-and-white and pinhole photography. As the words and music of the opening hymn, “All Who Love and Serve Your City,”

Risen Lord, shall yet the city
Be the city of despair?
Come today, our judge, our glory,
Be its name “The Lord is there!”

faded, stark images of suffering and brokenness in San Antonio were projected on screens before our eyes. There are some in the middle-class congregation I serve who encounter scenes like this everyday in their work as teachers in inner-city schools or

professionals working in the criminal justice system, but even they drive home and sleep in upscale urban or suburban enclaves. Most of us go days or weeks or years avoiding what is reality for so many of our San Antonio neighbors.

But on this Sunday, because of the photographic images before our eyes, we couldn't avoid the reality. We "saw" poverty, pain, and brokenness. We were forced to confront and confess our complicity in the sin of our community and consider how we might "work while it is day" ("All Who Love and Serve Your City").

The Sermon

"A picture is worth a thousand words," the saying goes, and, more often than not, it's true. A written prayer of confession a thousand words long cannot convey what a series of black-and-white photographs portraying specific scenes of the world's brokenness can.

The biblical writers and Jesus himself didn't have cameras, though, so they did the next best thing. They used words to paint pictures so that generations of Bible readers have been able to "see" what being sheltered by God looks like.

The Psalmist wielded his quill as a camera and wrote, "For the LORD will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; the LORD will conceal me under the cover of his tent," and what readers see are the deathly hot rays of the desert sun glinting blindingly off the grains of burning sand. Perhaps even more than seeing those rays, they feel them. They feel what it would be like to have sweat pouring off your body and your throat so dry that you're afraid you're going to die if you can't find water soon but what does it matter anyway because a whole army of everybody who has ever been out to get you is looming on the horizon heading your way when just then you see a tent, and you throw open the tent flaps and you go in, hardly even noticing its moldy smell, only its cool darkness and the dipper of water that someone holds out to you and you throw back your head and gulp down its refreshing wetness.

The Psalmist didn't have a camera, but he did a pretty good job of conveying what God's shelter and salvation are like by using words.

And Jesus does, too.

Not having a camera doesn't hinder Jesus from saying what his love for Jerusalem and everybody, the whole world really, looks like. Jesus' love is like a mother hen, fluffing up her feathers as a warm and homey shelter for her chicks, casting a protective eye toward any intruder into the hen house and if that intruder turns out not to be a seven-year-old ponytailed farm girl carrying an egg basket, but a fox with leering eyes and bared teeth, then she will offer herself up to be eaten rather than sacrifice one of her brood.³

That is what my love is like, Jesus says.

And Paul, picking up this thread, pulls it into his letter to the Philippians and says that the church is to be Christ's body; and this implies, I think, that if Christ's body is the body of a mother hen offering shelter to those who are vulnerable in this world, then the church which is Christ's body is called to do this, too.

Most of the time, with the exception of making my mortgage payment on time, I don't give much thought to the matter of shelter, but every now and then something happens that makes you think about shelter and what it might be like not to have any and what it does to you to not have some of those things that most people like you and me take for granted, like heat and light.

Once a year, I get together with a bunch of women preachers from various places around the country to renew our friendship and to share papers that we have written. It's come to be a time I greatly anticipate, especially when our meeting takes me to the mountains of North Carolina.

The mountains never fail to afford me spiritual refreshment, and this particular meeting of our group was no exception. We began with some great presentations and stimulating discussion. We drove into Asheville for dinner and enjoyed a fantastic meal. We came back to the two houses where we were staying, started a fire, poured the wine, and, what could be more perfect for someone from South Texas, it started snowing. And it snowed all night long.

The house where my half of the group was staying belongs to one of the members of the group who is married to an architect. Designed by him to be beautiful and comfortable, it afforded a breathtaking view of the snow-covered vista through glass windows that are basically two of the four walls of the main floor. The six of us staying in the house woke up the next morning, padded downstairs in our slippers and bathrobes, cradled mugs of coffee, peered out at the window-mounted thermometer that read 18 degrees, and ooh-ed and ah-ed over the beauty of God's creation.

And then there was a huge gust of wind outside, almost hurricane-like in intensity. The lights flickered. And then they went out. And they stayed out. And after about a half hour, someone called the power company, and we found out that power was out all over the place and we'd be lucky if we had it back by 6 p.m.

It got colder and colder, and these unshowered women of God who were staying in that glass house got crankier and crankier. We complained about the cold. We got annoyed with the six people in the other house because they were staying at the bottom of the mountain and could make it into town to a warm restaurant and eat a pizza for lunch. We gossiped about other ministers. We may even have been heard to utter a tiny complaint or two about a few members of our congregations.

Along about five o'clock, someone spotted a Carolina Power and Light truck heading down the mountain road and flagged it down. When one person told the guy driving the truck that we didn't have electricity, he said, "Ma'am, you should have had power hours ago." He pulled up his truck beneath the lines, hoisted himself up in his cherry picker, and in fifteen minutes, the lights blazed and the furnace started humming. He was as nice as he could be, and when one of us thanked him, he said, "Thank *you*, ma'am, for *your* patience."

That kind of embarrassed us, you know. I thought about how he had been out in the cold, working on power lines all day, and I know I teared up, and so did at least one other person. And while we didn't really talk about it in a direct way, I think we were all hit with a twinge of realization of how very, very privileged we are; and we realized that when you're cold and dirty and tired (even for just ten hours), it changes you and it diminishes you; and, while it was probably a pretty good lesson for people like us who have never been homeless a day in our lives, it's not what God wants for God's children anywhere in the world.

And what is it God wants for God's children everywhere in the world? What is God's vision for the way life is supposed to be? It's supposed to be like being sheltered from the desert sun in the safe protection of God's tent. It's supposed to be like being gathered under the wings of a mother hen. It's supposed to be a church turned toward

that vision and living every day as the sheltering body of Christ to make it so.

A Season of Scent - John 12:1-8

The Senses

I can't imagine preaching on John 12:1-8 in a setting with no candles, scented or otherwise. University Presbyterian is a candle-buying, candle-lighting church. Banking the chancel and stacking the communion table with candles of various sizes, shapes, and colors at the drop of a hat so that the whole place is ablaze with light and redolent with waxy fragrance is something that we love and are accustomed to doing (however, I do try to remember to alert members with allergies and chemical sensitivities when we make plans to do this. I'm not aware of anyone who stays home on our "candle days"; they simply find a seat in an area of the sanctuary that is not so perfume-y.) If your candle stash isn't as large as ours, you might consider inviting congregants to bring candles from home to recreate John's intimate tableau of the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

I also can't imagine preaching a sermon on John 12:1-8 while standing at a pulpit. The text limns a narrative pool of light into which the preacher is invited to stand. At University Presbyterian, the communion table is centrally placed in the sanctuary; thus, the table stacked with lighted candles visually mirrors Martha's dinner table and the Evangelist's narrative pool of light. It's a stunning place from which to preach.

The Sermon

As you read John 12: 1-8, what do you smell? What do you see? What do you hear?

Does the acrid smell of charcoal, the inviting aroma of grilled meat tickle your nostrils? The pungency of strong perfume layered over the odor of bodies that had borne the blazing heat of the Middle Eastern sun? Do you see the press of people in the tiny dwelling of Mary and Martha and Lazarus? Lazarus and Jesus immersed in conversation at the table that not too many days before had bowed under the weight of countless casseroles brought by friends and neighbors for Lazarus' wake while Martha flits between the kitchen and the table like a bee buzzing from blossom to blossom? Do you hear the clatter of dishes, the undulating waves of conversation washing though the room?

The smells, the sights, the sounds...your senses tell you in a myriad of ways that the house of Lazarus and Mary and Martha six days before Passover was a place of chaos. And add to that the smell of death that was in the room, the knowledge that the chief priests and Pharisees had given orders for Jesus' arrest, Judas' biting putdown of Mary, and the betrayal of Jesus that the reader knows is coming, and you also get the feeling that not only is it a place of chaos, it's a place where no one is safe.

Then suddenly, the room that has been harshly splintered with noise is absolutely still and quiet. Where there had been a clash of food and people odors, there is now only the fragrance of the perfume. In a room teeming with people, the action ceases, and the spotlight of John's narrative forms a circle of light in which there are only two: Jesus, who looks at Mary with a heart that burns with love for her, and Mary, feeling safe, feeling absolutely safe in the light-filled circle of Jesus' love and forgiveness, feeling safe enough to let down her hair and pour out the perfume of her love in return.

It is as if the Evangelist stages this scene so that we can't miss the contrast...the

contrast between the dark chaos of a world quaking with noise and betrayal and death, and the light-filled circle of the One whose hearts burns with love for us and in whose presence we not only feel, but are, absolutely safe.

Several years ago, I was lucky enough to travel to Colorado with our youth group for a conference where we all got to hear a fabulous preacher, Carol Clark. Over the course of the week, Carol's dog, Buster, made an appearance in several of her sermons. According to Carol, Buster has this rather strange habit. For instance, when Carol pulls out the dog shampoo, even though she's trying to hide it, Buster puts his head down, folds his ears back, and heads immediately down the hallway to the stairs and sits on the third step up—not the first step, not the fourth step—but the third step is where Buster goes, and that is where he sits. Or when Buster does something wrong and Carol says, "Buster, bad dog," Buster goes and sits—not on the first step, not on the fourth step—but on the third step up. Carol calls this step Buster's safe step. It's the place where Buster feels safe and secure, even though there's something scary getting ready to happen.

There aren't many truly safe steps in the world. The world can be a really scary, chaotic place. On the day that I am completing this article, in the middle of Domestic Violence Awareness month, the San Antonio newswires are transmitting news of a 35-year-old father shooting and killing his 8-year-old son and wounding his estranged wife and 3-year-old son before killing himself; and, on the international front, it is being reported that a car bomb has just exploded outside the Turkish Embassy in Baghdad, killing the bomber and one bystander, and injuring several others. On this day or on any other day, you don't need me to tell you how scary the world can be. The gospel writer knew it, and so do we.

Indeed, when you get right down to it, according to the Bible, there is only one really truly safe place, and that is in the circle of the light of the One whose heart burns with love for us.

That's what John is trying to tell us, I think, by staging the scene the way he does, with Jesus looking at Mary with a heart that burns with love for her, and Mary, feeling so absolutely safe in the light-filled circle of his love and forgiveness that she lets down her hair and is totally, completely herself and is moved to pour out the perfume of her love.

There is something else, too. I think John gives us this picture of how it is between Jesus and Mary not just to show us how it is between Jesus and us, but to show us God's vision of what the church is called to be...a safe step where people can come and be themselves, a light-filled place where people draw comfort and strength from God and from one another and are anointed with the power of God so that they get strong enough to push the edges of that circle of light outward until the whole world is resting in that safe place, too.

Notes

¹Jonathan Kozol, *Ordinary Resurrections: Children in the Years of Hope* (New York: Crown, 2000), 245-246.

²Marva J. Dawn, *A Royal "Waste" of Time, The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 74.

³Some of these images are drawn from Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley, 1997), 123-127.