

Protagonist Corner

Joanna M. Adams

Morningside Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia

Last summer, I celebrated the twenty-fifth year of my ordination as a Presbyterian minister. The anniversary came at an odd time. For the first time in a quarter of a century, I was not preaching or leading worship on Sunday mornings on a regular basis. On one level it was a relief not to be worrying about next week's sermon while I brushed my teeth, scrambled an egg, or watched a movie.

Is there anything more unrelenting than the task of preaching? I asked myself. No, I assured myself. Well, maybe labor pains before the birth of quintuplets.

I told myself that it might be time to seek a less demanding ministry, one that didn't require the sacrifice of Saturday nights out with my husband or cause me routinely to question whether I would ever have anything meaningful to say to anybody again.

Forget preaching, a little voice in my head kept admonishing, but in the end I couldn't do it. How could I forget the indescribable gladness that comes from those moments in the pulpit when I sense that I have been a genuine vessel of divine grace?

How could I walk away from the power of the story of creation and redemption that has been entrusted to the church and passed on from generation to generation? How could I walk away from the privilege of proclaiming the enduring Word during my fleeting little moment on this earth?

How could I forget my most beloved make-believe game when I was a little girl, long before I had ever heard a woman preach, an event that would take place only after I had begun attending seminary. I would line up my dolls on my bed, turn the radio on so that no one outside my room, especially my brother, could hear me, and deliver sermons to them. What joy. They listened in rapt attention, never even blinking an eye. In the end, I could not forget preaching. Being the bearer of Good News turned out to be an irresistible occupation for me.

Back in the pulpit, I am naturally encountering the same daunting realities I have faced since the day I knelt down on the sanctuary floor, had hands laid upon me, and received the peculiar office to which I have been called. I wouldn't trade my vocation as preacher for anything, but there are a few things I wish I had known when I went into this line of work originally. Here are two:

Preaching isn't easy. Truth is difficult to discover. Sentences are hard to craft. Effective public speaking requires disciplined commitment. Handling the responsibility of being "servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries" (I Cor 4:1) is not for the faint of heart. But then, nothing that has staying power or that offers a genuinely new life ever comes easily.

Every week I pray. Every week I study. Every once in a blue moon, the sermon comes easily, but most weeks I labor. I stare at the computer screen. I chew my pencil eraser. I become convinced that this is the week I have been dreading all along: There will be no Word from the Lord, and I might as well go ahead and jump out the window. Then, the miracle. The Spirit breaks through with a light that shows me the way home to God. I discover, once again, that we preach, as we live, by grace.

Preaching ought not to be boring. If we are convinced that the God we know in

Jesus Christ is sovereign, not only in the church, but in the broader realms of culture and society, then why we would who preach settle for offering only dull, in-house platitudes? Over the years, I have had to be reminded again and again that leadership is always integral to the office of preaching. I vividly recall the words of the preacher in the congregation of which I was a part as a young adult. He talked about the Civil Rights movement. He spoke out against the Vietnam War. He made the astonishing statement that God did not live in the church sanctuary. God has covenanted with the people to meet us there for worship he said, but God is out there. Christ is out there, where people suffer and long for justice. His words changed the direction and priorities of my life. That's the kind of thing I mean by leadership.

How wasteful to squander the power and authority of the pulpit by saying nothing that really matters. Who was it who asked a group of people-pleasing preachers, "Have you ever thought of ending your sermon any other way than 'But then again, what do I know?'"

People come to church needing to be challenged, even if they don't know they do. They need help from the Scriptures of the Christian tradition in grappling with the great dilemmas of our day. We preachers ought to hold up the daunting issues society wrestles with to the light of God's Word: economics, war, the environment, stem cell research, the role of lesbians and gays in the life of the church and society. People can take it! They are hungry for meaning and guidance. We have a responsibility to offer them meat, not marshmallows.

Over the years I have served congregations in decidedly different contexts and at different points in their histories, but there are two things they all have shared. The first is that they all wanted to hear a message of substance. The second is that the Holy Spirit was in their midst, and it wasn't all up to me. Even on those Sundays when I wanted to put a sack over my head because the sermon was so embarrassing, the Holy Spirit was still there doing the heavy lifting and communicating the grace of Christ and the love of God in, through, and in spite of me.

I think of a young Catholic couple whom I met at a night shelter where they and I volunteered some years ago. Over time, they came to know one of the guests quite well. His name was Randy. He had had pneumonia twice that winter and was constantly engaged in a battle with alcoholism. When he got sick again, my young friends took Randy to their house to stay with them and their two little children.

It seemed risky to me. "Why?" I asked.

"We think Jesus really meant it when he said, 'I was a stranger, and you welcomed me.'"

There you have it: The power of words. The power of the Word. The presence of God in the real world where we live. On these realities, I have bet my life. "Preacher" is not easiest vocation in the world, but I cannot imagine a richer or more meaningful life. There are some things better than a Saturday night without Sunday pressure. I think you know what I mean.