

Protagonist Corner

Cress Darwin

Second Presbyterian Church, Charleston, South Carolina

The prelude is over. The flowers are glorious. You stride down the center aisle greeting folks as the organ crescendos. The liturgist moves to the right and you to the left of the pulpit literally bounding up the stairs. The organ swells. You invite the congregation to stand, and they break out in joyous song—

Holy Holy Holy, Lord God Almighty ...

One in three persons, blessed Trinity.

You proclaim,

This is the day the Lord has made.

They respond,

Let us be joyful and be glad in it!

You say,

Please be seated!

Now's the moment. Every moment of your life has led you here, right here, right now. You have the winning ticket—you are to be the bearer of mysteries of God! Wow! *Yikes!*

Sunday is a special day, albeit seemingly under siege as attendance patterns change, but Sunday is the day that preachers ponder and pray towards to bring a message that speaks to the faithful and to those who may be wondering why and how they have found themselves here and are very likely wondering if, in fact, they are “rejoicing” or “glad.”

In truth, any Sunday there are many folks in church who may ordinarily be found in the park, at the beach, at brunch, or just taking their one day off to catch up on chores or much needed sleep. But on this morning folks are *here*—up, scrubbed up, some dutiful, some doubtful and still, others thrilled and in anticipation! What is it that drives people who never darken the door to wander in at other times?

New Year's Resolution? The need for inclusion in prevailing cultural rites? More likely there is a yearning, an ache, an emptiness that ultimately can only be filled with and by God. And it's your task (and privilege) to be the instrument that points to a celestial spot—a point where one is positioned for God's grace. I tell you all this because of the Gospel. There is an opportunity on this holy day—this day set apart from the other six. I know it's always a good day to proclaim the saving grace of Jesus, but on Sunday we have a historical, traditional, structural leg up! How do we make the most of it?

The real question is how does one turn this random visit into an ongoing relationship? How do we take the mystery of a risen Christ, which to some is foolishness, and make it relevant to their lives? What is it that you could say that would be used by the Holy Spirit of God to capture their interest, redefine their priorities, secure their hearts for Jesus?

Relevance is a word that comes up again and again around the halls of Second Presbyterian Church. *Is* the church relevant? How can the church *be* relevant? How

can a 200-year-old downtown church in the middle of historic Charleston, South Carolina, be the agent of the dynamic, still creating God—the agent of God’s love, the advocate of God’s justice—the herald of God’s good news? For the church to be relevant, the message must be relevant. For the message to be relevant, study and exegesis need to be laced with a dose of real life.

Let me tell you a bit about my real life and the path that led my wife and me to Second Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Rebecca and I met in New York City. We lived there most of our adult lives, she as the publisher of iconic magazines and I as a working actor, then as a television producer. Both of us worked in highly competitive fields, had full and rich lives, and moved in fairly social circles. We were newly married, had no children, and were making our way in our respective fields. An anchor for us in those days was the church—a community of diverse folks brought together at the “crossroads of the world.” We experienced community. We had fun. We shared Jesus. We served the community.

Traveling downtown on Sunday mornings, we would pass cyclists, joggers, folks with strollers, tables full of people with a cup of coffee in one hand and the paper in the other. Why were they given a pass? Or were they? What was it that we were on our way to that they had either rejected or simply had never experienced?

You see, Rebecca and I had both grown up in the church. I was a Southern Baptist from Texas who migrated to the Episcopalians, and Rebecca was a Methodist from South Carolina. Though like many we had drifted away during our college and early career years, we felt called to become a part of something that would keep us grounded during our first years as a couple—a place that would be a haven for us from the temptations of the fast life in New York City.

You know, the songs about New York aren’t always written by romantics. The city is tough, but egalitarian. And most decisions about time and how it is spent are not casual. If you do this, you can’t do that. Obvious, right? But what drives the choice? I came to believe that the choices, the important choices, were driven by that which was *compelling*.

I had come there as an actor, and though I’d had a decent career (I was a “working” actor), I’d hit a plateau. What I had access to, I didn’t want to do; what I wanted to do, I didn’t have access to. I had developed what I now refer to as *a healthy discontent*. You know, the occasional restless, irritable, discontented feeling that’s the spur that gets you off your bottom and moving into what’s next?

In one of those moments of God’s ubiquitous serendipity, I met a fellow who knew television production and was well connected on the West Coast. I could write and narrate and was well connected in New York. In a New York minute, we formed a production company and soon were meeting with an executive of the A&E Network about producing episodes for their budding *Biography* series.

I recall that first meeting and the tough talk we encountered. We were told how difficult it was to get anything on the air. It wasn’t just a choice between broadcast and cable; it had to do with the larger choices people made about their use of time each day. So the choice to watch this instead of that was driven by something that couldn’t be manufactured or bottled. The choice was driven by whether this was better than that, more entertaining, more informative, more moving, of more value, or more compelling. There we go again. It had to be *compelling*.

And in that conversation, he listed four elements that had to be present in order

to produce compelling television:

1. The resources to get it done.
2. The ability to do it.
3. An end user.
4. A project worth doing.

Let's take a look at this. What if you have something worth doing but you can't fund it? Doesn't work. What if you have a good project, the financing for it is committed, but you don't know how to get it done? Ain't happening. What if you have a pile of cash, a good project, the expertise to get it done, but no one buys it? No one wants it? There's no market? So you see there are a slew of variables that must converge for a project to make it to "air." Perhaps it's becoming more clear why I migrated from television producer to the pulpit!

Meanwhile, Rebecca was making her mark in the magazine publishing world. From *GQ* to *The New Yorker* to *Fortune*, with lots of hard work and many miles of travel in between, Rebecca proved that she could sell, sell, sell. She was a creative marketer, a trusted salesperson, and a strong and empathetic manager and leader. She racked up many "firsts" and successes along the way. But if you asked Rebecca how she succeeded, she would point to one of her first bosses and her mentor who taught her about *consultative selling*.

The most important aspect of consultative selling is *knowing your clients* – sitting on their side of the desk. So often, the typical salesperson is too quick to launch into the spiel about how great the product is without having laid any kind of foundation or learned why or if the product may be relevant for the customer. Consultative selling involves first asking questions, doing research, discovering what your customer needs to accomplish through marketing, and figuring out how (and even *if*) the product you are selling can match the client's needs. It's a process, it takes creativity, and it takes time. Only then can the truly successful salesperson come in with the deal. You see, consultative selling is about being relevant, too. Sound familiar? It's really a lot like "there has to be an end user."

Preaching to a secular crowd is not that different. Rather than being all geared up to talk about what one believes *should* be the message of the day or what the lectionary is suggesting, one needs to step back and consider the crowd—the believers, the seekers, those who have stumbled in. The question is, "What do they need to hear this day? What will be relevant for their lives? What will bridge this Sunday to Monday and through the week ahead?"

In the positioning prayer before the sermon, we say things like "May these words not be my words or opinions, but the words that You would have us hear... that would meet each of us at our point of need..." Do we really mean it?

It is so gratifying to stand at the door of the church greeting long-time members and fresh new faces and to hear the words, "It felt like you were speaking directly to me. How did you know that's what I needed to hear today?" Of course, we can't be all things to all people. There are always going to be those who cannot or will not receive that which is theirs no matter how it's packaged, but we can still put the tools of the culture to use for God's purpose.

So how do we move from earnest proclamation to a "signed deal," a transformed life? What from Rebecca's and my previous lives can we offer the preacher on the penultimate day of the year? This: the savvy of the marketplace methodology that

knows what drives our choices, that recognizes the opportunity, the chance, the necessity to employ the tools of the culture to reach people as they are, where they are for the high calling of who and whose they are.

We have the resources: the witness of the saints over the millennia, the revelation of God's Word revealed in scripture, informed and guided by the Holy Spirit.

We have the ability to get it done, not by our own reckoning, but through the nurturing and affirmation of individuals, sessions, seminaries, and colleagues. We are confirmed by our calling that we have been equipped.

There is a market—all, every single one of God's created, for whom God yearns, and who yearns for God is the singular and collective target or end user.

It is worthwhile. There is no greater privilege, no more important purpose, no more urgent need, no sweeter task than preaching God's justice, mercy, and love.

"This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it!"