

A Retrospect

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It has been a long run for me with the *Journal*, both as an editor and as a contributor. Here are some of my reflections on my investment in the *Journal*.

I

The *Journal* has been, beyond my expectation, a most important matrix for my own scholarly work as a biblical interpreter. According to my not-fully-reliable records, I submitted my first article to the *Journal* in 1985, the year before I joined the faculty of Columbia Seminary. That article in the Easter issue was entitled “The Family as World-Maker” (pp. 8-15). Beginning in 1987, my first full year at the seminary, I began to contribute regularly to the *Journal* almost every year, largely at the invitation of Erskine Clarke. The slow year-by-year accumulation of these scribbles led me to republish them in book form. My friend, K.C. Hanson, senior editor at Wipf and Stock, graciously agreed to the republishing, and did so in four small books: *Truth-Telling as Subversive Obedience* (2011), *Remember You Are Dust* (2013), *Embracing the Transformation* (2014), *The Practice of Homefulness* (2014). After some time, I also became an editor of the *Journal*. That work included the writing of a “Foreword” for several issues each year. The first of these was in Easter 1991. After that I wrote forewords regularly, for the most part alternating with Erskine Clarke.

The willingness of Erskine Clarke and the *Journal* to accept and publish my several articles over time was a very happy chance for me to write short pieces that sought to make telling connections between the Bible and contemporary practices of the church and, more specifically, the practices of preaching. Over time this process helped me in decisive ways to become unambiguously clear about my proper work. While I have always worked to maintain credible membership in the academic guild of Old Testament studies, I was able to see that my proper work was in and for the church. More specifically, the most important constituency for my research and writing have been the pastors of the church who themselves labor relentlessly to articulate the kinds of links and connections I have tried to make. While I think I have contributed significantly to the *Journal*, the *Journal* itself has had a significant impact on my vocational identity and focus. As a result, I have been able to keep clearly in purview the kinds of readers for whom I have wanted to do my work.

II

Erskine Clarke has developed and supported a reliable cadre of writer-preachers who have filled our pages with thoughtful, bold, and suggestive materials. On the one hand, this company of contributors has consisted in “celebrity preachers,” the folk who have immediate and widespread name recognition. This amazing company includes, among others, Tom Long, Barbara Brown Taylor, Sam Wells, William Barber, and Will Willimon. It has been a special privilege for me, as an editor, to communicate with and be taught by such luminaries in our common work. These “all star” preachers have enabled the *Journal* to maintain consistently high standards for our regular

readers. After all, these notable preacher-writers have not arrived at such status and recognition by happenstance or by accident, but as an outcome of hard work that has come via their uncommon gifts. Such preachers have set high standards for the rest of us and invited us and, by their example, empowered us to greater artistic imagination and to boldness in proclamation. To be sure, such preachers over time have benefited in their work with various support systems other preachers may not have, plus the luxury of travel and mobility that permit a good sermon to be sounded more than once. A good journal on preaching must offer the best preachers with the best sermons; happily, we have been able to do that in a consistent way.

III

On the other hand, most of the work of the *Journal* has not been done by celebrity preachers. It has been done, rather, by working parish pastors who do the daily, demanding work of pastoral care and administration, who live with endless conflict and challenge, and yet find time and energy to do the bold, thoughtful work of preaching. I am regularly astonished by the way in which Erskine Clarke has continued to recruit good preacher-writers from many places and many traditions, pastors who labor in relative obscurity, but who relentlessly hang in for the sake of the Gospel.

The large number of writer-preachers represented in our pages attests to the continuing importance and vitality of preaching, and to the large capacity among us to mobilize serious thought, vivid imagination, risky courage, and careful reading for that hard work. When one considers these work-a-day preachers in their localities, one comes to two fresh appreciations. First, we freshly appreciate the missional vitality of local congregations in their several contexts. Such congregations do not spend time reading op-ed pieces about the demise of the church; rather, they engage in missional ways in the Gospel issues in their contexts. A bit ago, Tia and I happily participated in a lovely dinner party to welcome our new associate pastor. I did not know everyone there, but I knew three couples, all somewhat older. One couple had devised a long-running program of breakfast seven days a week for many of our homeless community's population. One couple gives their energy to a church garden that produces great quantities of vegetables for our homeless shelters. The third couple had adopted an unwanted child with Down's syndrome and brought her to adulthood. None of these folk gloated over their missional work, but all of them did it, and surely all of them have been sustained in the missional work by good preaching and worship. These are the kind of folk who *evoke* good preaching and who, at the same time, deeply *depend* upon it. Their pastors (and a myriad like them) are the ones who have evoked and sustained such missional passion.

Second, we become freshly aware of how pivotal good preaching is for the experience of and mobilization of a missional congregation. After all the rhetorical fads and homiletical cleverness, what still counts in the local congregation is *truth-telling* about the pain of the world, and then *hope-telling* that evokes passionate investment. My faithful reading of the *Journal* articles and sermons regularly fills me with immense wonder and immense gratitude for the steadfast ways preachers do their work, hanging in despite all kinds of resistance and conflictual behavior in their midst.

IV

The accent of the *Journal*, of course, is not on its preacher-writers, celebrity or

otherwise. Our accent is unambiguously upon our readers. That readership is somewhat small. (We are hopeful that we will increase circulation with new prospects for marketing with our new leadership.) But it nonetheless includes a broad base of ecumenical interest that attracts not only preachers but other church leaders and folk who value the act and art of preaching. But the focus is upon working preachers who must and may regularly do the work of the proclamation of the Gospel. Every preacher I know who has not “gone to seed” is alert for new ideas, for fresh angle on a text, or a new image or metaphor to open reality differently. It is our hope and expectation that the *Journal* should respond to this requirement for preachers.

Beyond that, we are alert to the social context most preachers among us share. That context is variously marked by an erosion of pastoral authority, a loss of institutional credibility, the force of ideologies that sound true but are in fact inimical to the Gospel, and the seduction of the mantra “spiritual but not religious,” all reinforced by the losses dictated by the pandemic. The convergence of these several factors makes preaching a most demanding exercise. Indeed, give or take a bit, one could imagine that very many preachers can readily identify with Paul’s lyrical self-description: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed” (II Cor. 4:8-9).

A convergence of the social realities mentioned above can indeed cause a preacher to be *afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down*. Every preacher lives with such social realities in the process of sermon preparation and delivery. But of course what strikes one most forcefully in Paul’s statement is the resolve and reality beyond these negations. Given all of that with none of it denied or sugarcoated, Paul nonetheless is *not crushed, not driven to despair, not forsaken, not destroyed*. It is that series of refusals (“*not, not, not, not*”) that carries the day. What makes that great refusal possible, for Paul and for many of our readers, is the deep conviction that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us (v. 7). Such preachers, like Paul, are “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies” (v. 10). The risks and dangers are instanced by social context; the assurances on which we rely lie beyond social reality and yield an unaccommodating vocation. That is my sense of our readership, a company of called, convicted, determined folk. In various precarious social circumstances, they fall back on that “extraordinary power” that is on offer for those with eyes to see and hearts to receive.

Given that shared circumstance of our readers, I reckon that the *Journal* can serve such preacher-readers in two ways. First, our pages offer a rich attentiveness to fresh angles and images. Beyond that, second, the preacher-writers and preacher-readers of the *Journal* constitute a goodly band of sisters and brothers who, through a variety of connections, constitute a collegium who can say “We share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear” (*Glory to God*, 306). It is my hope and assumption that the *Journal* functions as a tool for solidarity so that our preacher-readers are not alone in facing *affliction, perplexity, persecution*, and being *struck down*, but belong to a company that knows, in solidarity, about that “extraordinary power that belongs to God.” At our most subversive risk-taking for the sake of the Gospel, it matters that we belong, together, to that great cloud of witnesses who “run with perseverance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1-2).

It is my hope and expectation that on both counts, as a source for *fresh thinking*

and as means of *collegial solidarity*, the *Journal* may support the faithful preaching of the church. At our best, we may hope that our preaching is fully marked, as it is at the end reported of Paul. He was “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:31). I love that final phrase in the Book of Acts, “without hindrance.” Who knew? Who knew as we read of the several tribulations of Paul in the Book of Acts or in his own epistles? Who knew that in spite of such risk and danger (II Cor. 11:25-28!), he would persist and end up “without hindrance”? This narrative in the Book of Acts is a summary report of a preacher who did not waver or give up in the face of deep challenge. The names of preachers who go on “without hindrance” is “*Legion*.” Happily, many of these are among our readers!

V

In retrospect, I am grateful on all counts for my time with the *Journal*:

- Pleased to have an opportunity to write and to be published in the *Journal*;
- Glad to have interacted with the celebrity preachers who occupy our pages;
- Rewarded by my contact with the company of on-the-job preacher-writers, and
- Encouraged by the host of our readers who do the day-to-day work of pastoral ministry.

Beyond all of that, however, the best and most singular blessing for me over this period of time has been my engagement with Erskine Clarke, with a chance to observe his work up close. The *Journal* is an outcome of Erskine’s imaginative will to support and encourage pastors, the product of his patient tenacity that has not only sustained the *Journal*, but has maintained the very high standards that he intended at the outset. There has been, to be sure, an important supporting cast of writers, editors, and nearly invisible staff to maintain the *Journal*. But it is Erskine who single-handedly has provided the energy and resolve for these many years of quality publication.

It strikes me, as I am informed by Paul’s Easter lyric, that Erskine is exactly an “Easter guy.” As every reader will know, Paul concludes his moving Easter doxology in his characteristic way, with an ethical imperative that arises from the news: “Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord our labor is not in vain” (I Cor.15:58). The marks of those who receive the new reality of Easter are to be *steadfast, immovable, excelling in the work of the Lord*. Over the years of the *Journal*, Erskine has been relentlessly steadfast in his vision for the *Journal*. And once he has set his course, he is indeed immovable. As for the “work of the Lord,” he and Nan do many things to contribute to the wellbeing of the neighborhood. But I reckon that Erskine’s primary “work of the Lord” in which he excels is to be a truth-teller through his singular historical research. He has not let us escape from the deep reality of injustice that occupies our common past. Such truth-telling is hard work, and Erskine has stayed at it through the many volumes of research and narration. Paul assures that such good work is “not in vain.” For sure Erskine’s truth-telling work has not been in vain. Nor has his deep investment in the *Journal* been in vain, for it has over this long run given support, encouragement, guidance, and sustenance for the faithful preaching of the Word.

I finish then with my great thanks to Erskine for his generous friendship and reliable colleagueship. On behalf of our many readers, moreover, I voice our common thanks for the work of the *Journal* that has been Erskine's great work that at its best has been "the work of the Lord."