

Social Crisis Preaching and Prophetic Responsibility

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Social crisis preaching, prophetic preaching, and preaching to social issues must transcend the rhetoric of proclamation in order to be effective and impactful. The true work of social crisis preaching lies in *who* the preacher is. Thus, the social crisis preacher has prophetic responsibilities and must bear marks of the prophet through imagination, discernment, and envisioning. These prophetic responsibilities are active before, during, and after the social crisis sermon has been preached. Kelly Miller Smith, Sr., in his book *Social Crisis Preaching*, refers to the “pre-proclamation functionality of the preacher.” Pre-proclamation is Smith’s first step in his delivery method of the social crisis sermon. Smith argues that the social crisis sermon begins before a word is uttered from the pulpit or even before the pen touches the paper in sermon preparation or writing the manuscript.

Pastors must enter into spaces *with* their members where sensitive and hard topics are discussed. These conversations may take place at the County School Board meetings, City County briefings, at Deacon’s Board meetings, over a latte at Starbucks, in hospital waiting rooms, over chili dogs while watching a playoff game, while driving to a party, or in the gym. No matter the venue, God opens the door for the pre-proclamation functionality. Pastors must be intentional, pro-active, and seize these moments of discipleship. This model is Ezekiel sitting *with* the exiles in Tel Aviv, and in holy resignation uttering “I sat where they sat,” (Ezek 3:15 AV). Moses exhibits this model as he “chose to suffer *with* the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin” (Heb 11:25; cf. Ex 2:10-12).

Pre-proclamation function of the preacher is perhaps the most important factor in social crisis preaching. Pre-proclamation activity is incarnational in that it entails the preacher’s involvement and engagement with the people to whom they will be preaching. Pre-proclamation also calls the preacher to be informed about the social crises. Congregations are more accepting and less critical of preachers who are knowledgeable of the crises being addressed, and who have been with them in living and life through crises, than someone who is disengaged and unfamiliar with the crisis.

Preaching About vs. Preaching To Social Crisis

There is a difference between preaching *about* (or *on* or *around*) a social issue and preaching *to* social crises. Preaching about social issues is an easy escape for the preacher who feels the burden to address the crisis but lacks the courage to confront the complicity to communal crises in the pews. One can provide data and related information *about* social issues and the issues that evolve into crises and still not

address the injustices of social crises. Preaching *about* social crisis is addressing the symptoms of social crises, in which the congregation is comfortable condoning, because symptoms often show up in other communities, but failing to address the root causes of which we are often a part. One can preach about a social crisis and not provide the congregation with specific, meaningful, practical application to tackle the injustices that impact everyday people whom we are called to love and serve. All it takes for this approach is for the preacher to skim the surface of the preaching text, sprinkle some news headlines, affirm God's love, and give the benediction. Preaching *about* social crises leaves many parishioners asking "now what?" or "so what?"

Preaching *to* social crisis is the hard work of leading the church to become what Sally Brown calls "agents of redemptive interruption."¹ Preaching to social crisis is about more than providing information, remaining neutral, or affirming long held but false assumptions and stereotypes about "the other." Preaching to social crisis involves digging deep into the text, finding the social tensions that the text addresses, naming them, shedding light on the contemporary parallels, delivering decisive application, then trusting God with the results. Preaching to social crisis is moving congregations beyond fear and bigotry to new, refreshing, and redemptive spaces where they are compelled to extend the radical mercy of God. Preaching to social crisis is helping the church membership to realize that they have been recipients of radical mercy. Preaching to social crisis, then, goes beyond transferring information to the depths of experiencing the Christian faith.

In *The Responsible Pulpit*, James Earl Massey lists five components of the African American preaching tradition that "help any preacher from any tradition to sense more clearly how to keep the verbal witness of the pulpit both virile, engaging, and effective."² The five sermonic components are functional, festive, communal, radical, and climactic. While one may detect traces of each component in social crisis preaching, the sermonic component most consistent and impactful in social crisis preaching and prophetic responsibility is the *radical* component.

Historically, *radicality* has been the most critical and constructive response to racism from the black church, and radicality has been the common thread among the Old Testament prophets. Courageous social crisis preaching confronts sin everywhere. Massey contends, "Radicality in the sermon engages the hearer. It makes him know that he is being confronted, that necessity is being laid upon him to respond. True preaching is always confrontational."³ Social crisis preaching is not an eloquent diatribe that simply identifies problems and introduces solutions. To the contrary, it demands that the hearer break from any and all political, racial, economic, or theological loyalties that are complicit in social crises. Luther D. Ivory notes, "A critical prophetic voice must be accompanied by confrontational prophetic action."⁴ Just as the nerves in our body alert us to confront the serious illnesses lurking in our organs, social crisis preaching takes prophetic action to confront the pain caused by the sin of social injustice. Social crisis preaching requires the pastor/preacher to take on

the activity of the prophet. The man or woman who stands to effectively proclaim the Gospel of Christ against the social injustices in our world must commit to a life of prophetic being. Thus, the embodiment of the prophet transcends and extends beyond the rhetoric of proclamation to responsibilities reflective of one who is conscious of the devastating impacts of social crises on the lives of image bearers. One must see and discern the causes and connections of social sins and imagine and proclaim a world where redemption and renewal are new realities for the least of these.

The Social Crisis Preacher as Old Testament Seer

Historically, preaching which addresses social issues has been referred to by a variety of labels: liberation preaching, preaching on social issues, justice preaching, social gospel preaching, the political pulpit, or civic proclamation. The term most commonly used to describe the functionality of preaching that addresses social issues is prophetic preaching. It is the preaching exercised by the Old Testament prophets. Social crisis preaching has elements of prophetic activity.

In the Old Testament, a common word used to refer to and reflect the prophet's function is *seer* (1 Sam 9:9, 9:11; 2 Kings 17:13; *ro'eh*). The prophet is one whom God grants spiritual insight into His will and the purposes He has for His people (Isa 3:7-10; Jer 29:11; Ez 37:1-14). The *seer* possesses a pathos of prophetic imagination and envisioning, both enabled by the Spirit of the Lord (Isa 61:1). The *seer*, then, can discern the *zeitgeist* (the spirit of the times), and has the foresight to capture possibilities of justice and human harmony while possessing the wherewithal to see through the forces that attempt to thwart those possibilities (Ezek 8:5-18; Amos 5:18-24; Zep 1; Zech 7-8; Mal 4:1-6).

Since the prophet is one who sees, it is not surprising, then, that some scholars, such as Walter Bruggeman, contend that prophetic preaching is rooted in the provocation of the preacher's imagination, an *envisioning* rooted in God's vision for His people. In prophetic activity, seeing (insight and understanding) precedes speaking. First, the prophet's mental and optical faculties align with that of Yahweh's (Isa 6:1-3; Jer 18:1-2). Then insight, understanding, and perception are granted to the prophet (Isa 6:4-7; Jer 18:3-4). Only then is the prophet permitted to speak on behalf of Yahweh (Isa 6:8-13; Jer 18:5-6). For example, Jeremiah *saw* the potter working a vessel of clay on the wheel and discerned the meaning (Jer 18:3-4), *then* he said, "Then the word of the Lord came to me: 'House of Israel, can I not treat you as this potter treats his clay?'" (Jer 18:5-6). Discerning, seeing, imagination, perceiving, and envisioning come before speaking.

The reason envisioning and imagination are indispensable aspects of social crisis preaching is because the prophet, as well as the preacher, must be able to understand clearly what causes injustice and then see how those injustices harm and hurt people who are created in the image of God. The Holy Spirit is the preacher's MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) that enables the preacher to clearly identify the precise location of the cancerous root causes of crises, so that a proper diagnosis can be giv-

en and a cure prescribed. The preacher who engages in prophetic preaching, by the power of the Holy Spirit, has the ability to capture God's vision for His world with imaginative insight. The prophets performed this divine activity through foretelling and forthtelling. Foretelling is future oriented, whether for blessings or for doom (Isa 9:1-7; Dan 5:17-30; Zech 14). Forthtelling, however, is confronting sin in the here and now, with the word from the Lord (2 Sam 12; Jer. 7:1-7ff; Mal 1).

Imagination and envisioning God's vision enables the prophet to articulate that vision with picturesque language to the people of God. Social crisis preaching encompasses this component of envisioning, in essence, seeing with the eyes of God. Like the seer, the prophet's ability to visualize empowers them to speak with vivid imagery and sharp artistry. Old Testament scholar R.B.Y. Scott precisely describes the prophet's unique responsibility. He states, "The grasp of the moral and spiritual realities of a given situation, coupled with the certainty that he [the prophet] must proclaim them in unmistakable terms, marked off a prophet like Micah or Amos."² It is no wonder then that the prophets spoke with such poetic language. Seared in the prophet's mind is a vision they could only capture in figurative, symbolic, and metaphoric language. Like the Old Testament prophets, the African American preaching tradition, known as exemplars of prophetic preaching, often employs the creative use of language to capture such visions. The African American preacher's use of creative language, according to homiletics scholar Cleophus J. LaRue, "[was] intended to free the poet in the preacher and allow the presence of God through the power of language to lift the sermon to higher heights."³ This ability is not confined or limited to African American preaching; it is extended to all who will submit their hands, feet, heart, mind, and ear to the Holy Spirit.

All of this means the social crisis preacher cannot be blind, gullible, or naïve. The ability to perceive and understand the political and economic manifestations of greed, racism, national idolatry, and xenophobia and the subtle consequences on communities is as paramount as grasping God's impartial love for all creation. Biblical social action is an extension of being regenerated. According to the Baptist Faith and Message, "All Christians are under obligation to seek to make the will of Christ supreme in our own lives and in human society. Means and methods used for the improvement of society and the establishment of righteousness among men can be truly and permanently helpful only when they are rooted in the regeneration of the individual by the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ."⁴ Through God's redeeming sacrifice of Jesus Christ, we are compelled to love God and our neighbor as fellow children of God. Whenever these sins mark the believer, they rob God of His glory, which is meant to be manifested in His creation. Moreover, these sins are idolatrous responses to the impartial love of God. The social crisis preacher must be as "wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matt. 10:16). Social crisis preachers must not be easily fouled, manipulated, or easily lulled to sleep by charming grins and polite concessions, the steady drip of anesthesia that causes loss of sensitivity and awareness in the Body of Christ.

Likewise, this preacher must be conscious and aware, possessing understanding and exercising discernment, and not be easily moved or distracted by the luxuries in the king's palace or flattered by the invitations to banquets and blessings. Daniel was able to say to Nebuchadnezzar "Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another" (Dan 5:17). Daniel's ability to interpret amidst distractions is akin to the discernment and envisioning that social crisis preachers must possess if they are to "read the handwriting on the wall" of our contemporary landscape. The pre-proclamation function of the social crisis preacher is the social crisis preacher's knowledge, awareness, and involvement in what God is doing in and around the communities of the people in the pews.²⁸ Below, two scholars expound on the dynamics of imagination and envisioning as pointedly components of prophetic responsibility and social crisis preaching. Social crisis preaching bears semblance with "prophetic preaching," or more specifically, social crisis preaching bears elements of the prophetic activity as described by Walter Brueggemann and Kenyatta Gilbert.

Walter Brueggemann and Prophetic Imagination

Walter Brueggemann casts the envisioning element of the prophet by stating "Prophetic utterance is offered in circumstances dictated by dominant imagination but its utterance that contradicts what is taken for granted. Such imagination refuses to accept accepted explanations for present circumstances."²⁹ The social crisis preacher who is in tune with God's vision for humanity articulates a vision that may seem impossible, unattainable, foreign, and out of reach for those unable to grasp what can be, for being gripped by what has always been. Social crisis proclamation introduces the hearer to "the already, not yet" of possibilities that are realizable when the church responds to the social crisis sermon with daring actions that disrupt the established practices of the powerful against the world's most vulnerable. The prophetic imagination envisions and proclaims a world where wealth, agency, and privilege are used to eradicate exploitation and disenfranchisement until economic and socially afflicted communities are restored to places of empowerment and flourishing. The prophetic imagination cannot be bound or restricted. Thus, the social crisis preacher is under no obligation to align the prophetic imagination to the wishes and whims of denominational creeds, political parties' platforms, and revisionist historians, because their allegiance is to God alone.

The social crisis preacher's prophetic imagination, grounded in the reality of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, is proclaimed in words that liberate humanity and announce freedom to humanity, from the tyranny of sin of any kind, spiritual and social. In the same sense, Kelly Miller Smith Sr. states, "The social crisis preacher has the opportunity, like the prophet, to address issues that are being overlooked or treated lightly by the forces of religion."³⁰ Unless the social crisis preacher is aware of the Holy Spirit's voice and leading, the often subtle, hidden, and disguised practices of oppression, which are often imbedded in institutions and systems, will continue to exist.

Kenyatta Gilbert and Vision in Exodus Preaching

Kenyatta Gilbert refers to preaching that dismantles evil structures and ushers freedom as *Exodus preaching*. Exodus preaching contains attributes of the seer. Exodus preaching involves the ethics of envisioning because it employs the imagination to both cast and capture a glimpse of God's design for creation. Gilbert states, "Exodus preaching does not take place in a vacuum, nor is it self-generated discourse; rather, it is daring speech that offers a vision of divine intent. It reveals a picture of what God intends and expects of God's human creation..." When social crisis preaching or prophetic proclamation wanes, one must ask, is it because we have failed to hold the decaying spiritual and social condition under the light of divine intent? What did God intend before the fall? What beauty does the hope of the eschaton offer?

In the African American preaching tradition, preaching is dialogical. During the preaching moment, the pulpit and pew engage in call-and-response, intuitive antiphonal expressions in vocal spontaneity. For example, when the preacher's illustrations illuminate the interpretation of the biblical text through their "sanctified imagination," often from the pews someone will call out to them "Paint the picture, Reverend!" or "Make it plain!" which means the preacher is using such vivid language sufficient for the congregation to see what they are saying as if an artist is painting a picture. The social crisis preacher must employ evocative pronouncements so that the congregation can visualize and see the intended economy of Eden on earth, and so that one can picture the hope of the coming Kingdom amidst communal despair. This very act of imagining the divine intent correlates with the way Jesus taught His disciples to pray "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10). The Holy Spirit inspires the social crisis preacher to visualize God's intentions for His people through social crisis proclamation. The social crisis preacher, standing in the role of the prophet/seer, envisions exodus from tyranny and oppression to venues of hope and liberation.

Conclusion

Social crisis preaching requires the acceptance and embrace of prophetic responsibilities. Among the most vital of those responsibilities, like the seer, is the ability to see, discern, and imagine. Luke Timothy Johnson notes, "The prophetic word can be considered as God's vision for humanity, which more often than not comes into conflict with humanity's own vision for itself." Though Judah's outlook for their own future was bleak and was in conflict with God's exilic vision for them, the seer, Jeremiah, proclaims God's vision for the exiles of Judah in Babylon:

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile. (Jer 29:11-14)

In the years following the Civil War, the prophetic proclamation of Daniel Payne and Henry McNeal Turner was a bastion of resistance against lynching and government-sponsored disenfranchisement against Blacks because, like the seer, they imagined a better reality. Responding to the dehumanizing realities and emotionally destructive ordeals of the Jim Crow Era, Martin Luther King, Jr., Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., Fred Shuttlesworth, Reverdy Cassius Ransom, and countless others forged America to a new era of human progress and hope. Leading the charge in almost every period of social change are preachers, responsible as prophets, who are committed to the principles of social crisis preaching, biblical proclamation that develops congregations to intentionally care about and confront the crises in their neighbor's community through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Notes

- 1 Sally A. Brown, *Sunday's Sermon for Monday's World: Preaching to Shape During Witness* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020), xviii.
- 2 James Earl Massey, *The Responsible Pulpit* (Anderson, IN: Warner Press, 1974), chap. 6. Kindle.
- 3 Massey, *The Responsible Pulpit*, chap. 6.
- 4 Luther D. Ivory, *Toward A Theology of Radical Involvement: The Theological Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 90.
- 5 R.B.Y. Scott, *The Relevance of the Prophets: An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets and Their Messages* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1944), 92.
- 6 Cleophus J. LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 10.
- 7 1963 and 2000, *Baptist Faith and Message*, "XV. The Church and the Social Order," <https://bfbisbe.net/comparison-chart/>, accessed January 29, 2022.
- 8 Pre-proclamation of the social crisis preacher is one of Kelly Miller Smith's seven components of the social crisis sermon. The seven components are: pre-proclamation function of the preacher, development of content, words used, the perceptual powers of focus, the structure, delivery of the social crisis sermon, post-delivery function of the preacher. See Smith, *Social Crisis Preaching*, 80.
- 9 Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 41.
- 10 Kelly Miller Smith, *Social Crisis Preaching: The Lamon Beecher Lectures 1983* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), 53.
- 11 Kenya Gilbert, *Exodus Preaching: Crafting Sermons About Justice and Hope* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), IX.
- 12 Luke Timothy Johnson, *Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church: The Challenge of Luke-Acts to Contemporary Christians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), 72.