

Preaching: Acting Up with the Holy Spirit

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A student emerged from Duke Chapel after service saying, “Thanks for a good sermon. God really spoke to me today.” I asked, delightedly, “How was my preaching helpful?” “Your sermon gave me the guts to call my father and tell him I’m not going to law school. If he doesn’t like it, he can go to hell.” “Don’t mention where you were at eleven this morning!”

My point? I didn’t do that. Not only is the Holy Spirit the “more” of Christian preaching because the Holy Spirit is the spirit of Jesus, it’s the invasive, disruptive agency of preaching. I could preach without having a nervous stomach if I knew how to keep my sermons safe from the threat of the Holy Spirit. Trouble is, on more Sundays than not, in spite of our locked doors, the Holy Spirit rips the sermon out of my hands and says more than I meant, disrupting a church that I—by theological training and natural inclination—intend to sedate.

Christians are nothing without the Holy Spirit. Little in the Christian faith is self-derived. Jesus commands us to venture courageous, countercultural, demanding lives. He orders us to love one another, to love our enemies, to take up the cross and follow, but never by our own devices. That’s why the historic core of the service of ordination is the *Veni Creator Spiritus*, “Come, Creator Spirit.”¹ The church in its wisdom knows that preaching ought not be attempted alone. Just as the Spirit brooded over the waters at creation, faithful sermons are conceived and birthed by the Holy Spirit. Preparation for preaching requires the discipline of regularly standing before God empty-handed, mute, brashly begging God for words we cannot say on our own.

James Kay characterizes sermon prep as human work undertaken in concert with the Holy Spirit: “All sermon preparation therefore must be a prayer for the Holy Spirit to take our ordinary words, however eloquent or inarticulate, and make them the bread of life. Here the sermon, on analogy with the Lord’s Supper, is always a matter of *epiclesis* or invocation. . . . Come Creator Spirit!”¹ When we pray “Come, Holy Spirit!” it’s as if we ask, “Bring it on, Holy Spirit! Shake our foundations, send us forth, kick us out, set us on fire, and give us something more interesting to say than we would have said on our own!”

If not for continuing Pentecostal commotion, we would have nothing to say that the world couldn’t hear as well through exclusively worldly means. That’s why seminary homiletics courses are susceptible to the charge of a-theism—tempting students to substitute merely human rhetorical technique for empty-handed, pneumatological dependence. The church speaks not by savvy, worldly wisdom, strategies for church growth, or helpful psychological advice, but prophetically, in all times and places, driven by the prodding of the Spirit.

Preaching is based upon the character of God. We know from Scripture that God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is relentlessly revealing. When someone hears gospel, Luther’s *verbum externum* (the external word we cannot say to ourselves), it’s a practical, mundane validation of Scripture’s claims of God’s determined self-revelation. If a preacher manages to assert anything faithful in a sermon, it’s a Holy

Spirit induced miracle, public, practical demonstration that God has refused to be God without us.

When Christians say Holy Spirit, we are talking about God. More pointedly, we are saying Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who are one. When you are third in a list, for instance, like in the Apostles' Creed, third can seem an afterthought. The Father creates, the Son redeems, and the Spirit—well, *what does the Spirit do?*²

The Holy Spirit is more than personal, vaguely spiritual experience; the Holy Spirit is who God is and what God does as the Trinity, whether we feel it or not, God's anything-but-vague self-presentation. Thus, in a sermon on the Holy Spirit, Gregory Nazianzen says that we ought never compromise the unity of the Trinity when we talk about the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit ought only be distinguished from Father and Son by a title: *proceeding*. Gregory explains that “ingenerate” belongs to the Father, “begotten” to the Son, and “proceeding” to the Spirit.³ The Holy Spirit is the means by which God the Father and Son proceed into human history.

God shows up, invades, self-reveals, impregnates, and becomes incarnate as Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Others in this issue of *Journal for Preachers* will speak to various gifts of the Spirit. Let them take mercy, peace, etc. As an aging preacher, I would like to testify to a spiritual gift that Paul fails to mention, perhaps because it was so obvious to him personally—*disruption*.

A Christian is someone who has submitted to an unbalanced, instable life, a life out of control, driven by and accountable to someone more interesting than ourselves or even our church, i.e. the third person of the Trinity, God in action.

The Jesus drama is instigated by the Holy Spirit's disruptive impregnation of Mary, who “became pregnant by the Holy Spirit” (Matt 1:18). Just as the Spirit brooded over the waters at creation (Gen 1), so the fecund Spirit continues to create, God for us, whether we asked for so interesting a God or not.

As Jesus came up from the water, the heavens were opened, “and he saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and resting on him” (Matt 3:16). Describing the Holy Spirit as “resting” on Jesus could be misleading were it not for John the Baptist's warning that whereas he baptized with water, Jesus's baptism was of “the Holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16). As I heard Barbara Brown Taylor say in a sermon, this dove has claws.

Because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Son, the Holy Spirit is as disruptive, as demanding, and as communicatively aggressive as Jesus. Thus right after baptism, Jesus, “full of the Holy Spirit” (Lk 4:1) is driven into the wilderness (Mk 1:12) for head-to-head homiletical competition with the devil. “Filled with the power of the Spirit” (Lk 4:14), Jesus bursts forth into Galilee. At his premier sermon, Jesus immediately incites an otherwise serene Sabbath-keeping congregation to murderous riot because “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, ... to preach....” (Lk 4:18). The question, “What can the Spirit do that Christ cannot do better?” finds its answer in Luke 4. The Spirit teaches Jesus to preach.

Disruption is a gift of the Holy Spirit, given for the sake of all who attempt homiletics. To all the sweet people who come to church murmuring, “I want to be more spiritual,” the church responds not only with, “Have some bread, take some wine,” but also with “Listen to the truth about God delivered by someone who looks suspiciously like you without killing her for saying it. If that works, we'll baptize

you and make you subject to the same Spirit who has emboldened the preacher.”

The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, is sent not to give us a warm feeling of peace, but rather to “teach you everything, and remind you of all I have said to you” (John 14:26), everything, even the offensive commands of Christ that we have tried so hard to forget: turning the other cheek, praying for enemies, and letting the dead bury the dead, etc. That the Holy Spirit “will teach you everything, and remind you” of all that Jesus said is a bit threatening. Here is truth we cannot teach ourselves, truth that is not only a great mystery to us but also truth so demanding that we, in our human sin, cannot attain on our own, truth that we have marshaled some of our best intellectual resources to avoid.

That the Holy Spirit teaches is also reassuring. We preachers don’t work alone. The truth about God makes a way for itself, in the power of the Holy Spirit, boring into the hard hearts and thick skulls of our listeners in ways we do not control. We preachers thus take heart that when it comes to speaking, hearing, and obeying God’s word, in speaking to and listening to God, we are not left to our own devices. As Paul says, “The Holy Spirit comes to help our weakness” (Rom 8:26).

The Acts of the Apostles makes clear that the Holy Spirit induced disruption embodied in the preaching of Jesus now accelerates, goes worldwide, infecting his followers, pushing them out of their comfort zones all the way “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The Body of Christ, the new visible presence of the Trinity, is God in motion into the world.

On Pentecost, Jews from all nations were convened in one place. Suddenly a sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind filled the entire house, flames of fire alighting on each. Filled with the Holy Spirit, they began to speak in other languages, enabled by the Spirit (Acts 2:1-4). They spoke of God’s deeds of power. Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and all the rest of the far-flung Jewish diaspora heard in their own languages a new “thing.” That new creation by audition would bear the name *church*.

That the birth of the church by the Holy Spirit entailed the gift of languages is not accidental. At Babel humans had tried to reach to the heavens so that they might be as gods. Speaking one language gave them the presumption that they were in control of communication, in charge of their destiny. In response to their attempt to be like God, they were punished by being separated from one another by different languages. Unable to communicate amid the babble, they became Strangers, enemies. At Babel the violence begun with Cain’s fratricide of Abel (Gen 4) became the new normal in a world with no common language and many barriers to community.

Pentecost brought peace, not by healing difference through the technique of “English only” institutionalization of one language to replace the many, but through a multilinguistic community called church. Christians would be forced, by baptism, to learn the language of the stranger, Christ, making them strangers to the world as a people of peace in a world of violence. Driven by the Holy Spirit into the world, they would be forced to learn the language of others in order to spread the news that God has destabilized present arrangements in a continuing revolution called the Kingdom of Heaven.

Some who witnessed the gift of tongues at Pentecost mocked those who were possessed by the Spirit as drunk, under the influence, out of control. Peter, however,

denied they were drunk, saying it's "only nine o'clock in the morning!" (Acts 2:15). Then, under the power of the Spirit, Peter preached, drawing on the prophet Joel's dramatic apocalyptic imagery to indicate that a new age was breaking out. His sermon would become the model for Christian preaching in Acts, proclaiming that Israel's messianic hopes were now fulfilled, even expanded, in Jesus Christ.

Remember where we left Peter in Luke's Gospel? Peter was unable to say one faithful word when confronted by the maid in the courtyard before Jesus's crucifixion (Luke 22:54-62). Now Peter boldly preached! No exclusively human explanation accounts for Peter's homiletical courage. Peter's preaching is solid evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit.

According to Peter the giving of the Spirit was nothing less than the advent of a new age inaugurated by the Holy Spirit. In former days, the Spirit was given to a few individuals, that is, prophets who were empowered to speak God's truth. But there would come a day, prophesied Joel, when God's Spirit would be poured upon all. That Spirit flood would result in prophetic sons and daughters, visionary young persons, and old folks daring to dream. Even slaves, men and women alike, would prophesy. All, even those who were previously voiceless and hopeless, would be enabled to speak up and speak out in God's name. Thus Peter boldly proclaimed that the work of the Spirit is no different from the work of Christ. To have the Spirit is *to have Christ*. The Holy Spirit does not enable us to say more than Christ; the Spirit enables us to speak of Christ (Acts 2:37-39), leading us to say things we would not venture on our own.

The Holy Spirit descends to us where we are and communicates God to us in ways we can comprehend, healing the chaos and confusion of Babel. While a new age is inaugurated, bringing into existence a new people, the essential mission of the Spirit remains the same: the Spirit disrupts settled power arrangements, mocks official modes of explanation, and kicks down boundaries we have erected between one another. The primary mode through which this divine commotion is accomplished is through uppity, brash proclamation.

The church, says Chris Hughes, is subject to a "permanent Pentecost." By the Spirit the church is gathered in order to utter the cry toward which it lives: "Come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:20).⁴ Unfortunately, the church is often comfortable in its captivity and cultural servilities; therefore, in the power of the Holy Spirit, Pentecost keeps happening, a preacher rises to speak, the Spirit descends, shakes up the congregation, and it's Luke 4 and Jesus in the pulpit at Nazareth all over again.

As I sought to offer consolation to an Alabama pastor after a fire destroyed his church, the pastor surprised me by saying, "We lost a lot in that fire. A hundred years of memories. Still, maybe God was in it." "How do you mean?" I asked. "We had talked about moving up on the highway, talked about how we ought to merge with the African-American congregation up the road. Nothing ever came of it. Maybe we loved this old building too much," he explained. "I ain't saying that the Holy Spirit was behind the fire that took our building, but it is the kind of thing God might do if God really wanted us to move rather than sit here. God's done it before." Before venturing an epiclesis, be sure you can handle what happens if your prayer should be answered!

The first time we hear Jesus preach in Mark (Mk 1:21-28), it's on a Sabbath in Capernaum. The congregation is settling in to once again hear the sweet bromides

and platitudes they crave. Everyone is centering, achieving greater balance, quietly keeping Sabbath. Then Jesus begins to preach. “I know who you are Jesus!” shouted a possessed man. “You are from God, come to destroy us.”

Mark gives not a word of Jesus’ sermon, perhaps because the explosion was not due to what Jesus taught but rather how he taught. Jesus spoke as “one with authority,” that is, speaking under the compulsion of external authorization. That same Spirit that had descended upon Jesus at his baptism, that had driven him into the wilderness with the devil, had now driven him to speak in a way that caused demons to stir and all hell to break loose, destroying the faithful’s Sabbath. In Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit, heaven has opened and, among the faithful, all hell breaks loose.

Jesus is crucified and entombed (in a vain attempt to shut him up and hold him in one place). In the interim between his death and resurrection, according to First Peter 3:19-20, Christ descended and preached to the dead, harrowing hell during the sermon. First Peter’s claim is so in keeping with Jesus’s character to disrupt, liberate, dislodge even the dead. (I have found comfort in this text when I’ve had to preach in some moribund congregation.)

After decades, I’m still invigorated by the homiletical task. I still question why God called somebody like me, to whom the status quo has been so good, to preach this discombobulating good news. Oh, but what joy to cast my words into the silence on the wager that God might use my Southern-accented, scratchy voice for purposes greater than I intended.

The faithful gather seeking consolation for their aches and pains, confirmation of their illusions about themselves, a purpose driven life, additional aid in their preservation of the status quo, or whatever it is they worship rather than Jesus. And then I rise to preach, the Holy Spirit slips into our moderate, Methodist meeting, the place begins shake, I smell smoke, demons are let loose, the Holy Spirit intrudes, and I step aside and watch the fireworks. Fellow preachers: I don’t care how demanding it can be to work with the Holy Spirit, a less interesting God wouldn’t be worth our efforts.

Notes

1 James F. Kay, *Preaching and Theology* (St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 2007), 67.

2 This is Eugene Rogers’s formulation of the question in his book *After the Spirit: A Constructive Pneumatology from Resources outside the Modern West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 19.

3 See Frederick W. Norris, *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning: The Five Theological Orations of Gregory of Nazianzen*, trans. Lionel Wickham and Frederick Williams (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991). Gregory, *Holy Spirit*, 31.7.

4 Christopher R. J. Holmes, *The Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2015), 262.