

Let the Journey Begin: When Our Word Becomes Flesh

Michael B. Brown
Marble Collegiate Church, New York, New York

I've always felt one of the most electric verses in all scripture is found in the prologue to John's gospel: "And the WORD became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth..." (1:14).

We who dare to preach (with thanks to Gardner Taylor for that phrase) seek to make incarnate a WORD that is above us and beyond us and within us and for us and for all others in all places and all ages. To honor that challenging work requires that we become wordsmiths. We become those who craft a word for the listeners, often laboring to find the exact word for a precise moment. That, in my experience, has produced most of the sweat of sermonizing.

Who hasn't experienced that while working on next Sunday's message? You write, and all seems fluid and productive for a while. But then you pause because you can't find the exact word with which to say what needs to be said. Suppose, for example, your topic is the inner hunger for a deeper spiritual relationship. "We want God" appears on your legal pad or laptop. But as soon as *want* is written, you know the word is pedestrian and plain. It's what you intend, sort of, more or less, but it's not enough. And so you audition other words as a director would actors or singers when casting a play. "We want God." No, that's not quite right. "We desire." Yeah, that's closer. It's not perfect, but it's closer. But, we desire what? "God?" Too predictable. What's *the* phrase, *the* word? "More of God?" Okay, I'll go with that, we tell ourselves... for now, at least, though we know it still is not quite enough. "We desire more of God" will have to do.

And so we push forward to exegete and illustrate and write and edit and write some more. But gnawing inside us is a shadowy feeling, a lack of satisfaction. While pushing forward, we can't quite stop looking back. There must be a better, stronger way of saying what we were trying to say a few moments earlier. There must be a clearer word. So, back we go to the troubling phrase and hold new auditions. "Want?" Cross that out. "Desire?" Close, but not enough. "We long for" Better. To be sure, it is better, and we know we could settle for that. But still, we would be settling. We wait. We wonder. We write and cross out and write again like Frost seeking for the word *diverge* in "The Road Not Taken." And then comes the moment, the epiphany, the light in which the right word appears. "Yearn." That's it! We know that's it by the way our breathing eases when we whisper the word out loud. *Yearn*, like a suitor does for the return of affection when he is unsure how she feels. He yearns for her. Sometimes he yearns simply to see her, to be in her presence, which would be enough. That's the word, we finally understand. But, it has to feed into another word, the completion of the thought, in such fashion that it becomes whole. "We yearn *for* God?" Not quite. It is true, of course, but not poetic enough to capture the spirit of what we want to express. We yearn for what? For what? And again the inner writhing begins, the wrestling with words to find *the* word. Again we return to our work on the remainder of the sermon tormented that there is something sacred left unfinished

three paragraphs back. It is the same agony one feels when trying to remember a name or fact, when it's on the tip of your tongue but you can't quite pull it up. And then at some wonderful, liberating moment you hear yourself think it: "We yearn for a sense of the sacred in our lives." We rush back to the unfinished place in the manuscript and type that phrase. And we speak the phrase, tentatively at first as if it may still not be enough. But, when we hear it from our own lips, we know it is right. It is *the* phrase that clarifies everything around it, all that went before and is yet to come. And it had to be that phrase, that word, before the rest of the sermon can be whole.

Part of the agony of preaching is the pregnancy of waiting for words to be birthed. We feed ourselves the nutrition of myriad thoughts and phrases, as expectant moms do with vitamins. And like those moms-to-be, we cast aside other inadequate words as if they were Marlboros or whiskey sours that could damage the life waiting to be born. We can have none of that here! We are birthing something holy, and it has to be kept safe from that which is not enough.

Another part of the agony of preaching is beyond our control. It is the work of the listener. Maybe more than work, it is the timing of the listener's inattentiveness. When the moment comes that *the* word is spoken, the word that makes sense of everything else to be said that day, just in that moment he checks his watch and wonders how much longer this will take, or she hands a lozenge to her coughing child. And the word or phrase that is at the heart of all the other words surrounding it is missed. A cynic would ask, "Was all the preparation worth it?" But you and I know. We stood on holy ground when we prepared this message. And holy ground demands our best. In fact, that is why we worked so hard—because it was about God. At some point, it was even about our own souls. Men glancing at watches or mothers tending to children do not change that. Holy ground makes no room for mediocrity.

This is a taxing business, which others hope we will make look easy. I'm not much fun on Saturday night, my wife sometimes reminds me. That is because I preach the sermon, then preach it again and again until I can do so without looking at the manuscript. I preach it until it migrates from my page or screen into my head. But even that is not enough. I keep practicing on Sunday mornings until it migrates from head to heart, until not only do I know it, but I also feel it. Only then is it ready to be preached. But, in the midst of that effort to make the preaching event seem conversational, even sometimes spontaneous, the carefully chosen words or phrases remain intact. Essential. Imperative. It all hangs on them. And however naturally they may seem to slip from your tongue, you will know you searched for them diligently and, once found, cherished and protected them "like a treasure buried in a field" (Matthew 13:44). They become *the* WORD, the right and crucial word, made incarnate in your preaching.

Don't waste your time seeking to discuss the joyful agony of preaching with the man who writes his sermons on a single sheet from a legal pad every Sunday morning in a local diner and then Googles in search of a text to support what he just scribbled down. He will not understand. He knows only the desire to have enough words to fill fifteen minutes, but they do not have to be the right words. His energy is invested instead in daydreams of some denominational committee meeting he will chair Tuesday evening. Enter rather into a mental discourse with Frederick Beuchner or Barbara Brown Taylor or some other artist who labors long and lovingly to make their own words become flesh to such extent that the One about whom those words

are spoken is once more incarnate.

“The WORD became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth....” That is the promise that inspires those of us who preach. It is both our agony and our ecstasy. And ultimately it is also our source of meaning, as the realization settles upon us that we are.... That we are what? What’s the word? *Mouthpieces*? No, that’s not it. Not even close. *Vessels*? Closer, to be sure, but there’s a better word. The realization settles upon us that ...? The realization settles upon us that ...? Ah. And ultimately it is also our source of meaning, as the realization settles upon us that we are conduits of the living Word of God.