

Preaching during Lent in 2015

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“What we have in mind is not a ‘Preaching the Lenten Texts’ article, but an article on Lenten preaching in 2015 that is a reflection, a kind of musing, on the task of preaching during Lent in 2015.... What are the distinct challenges and opportunities for this particular season?”

~Walter Brueggemann & Erskine Clarke
Editors, *Journal for Preachers*

Preaching

Preaching is a funny thing. Formal, it faces now an age valuing informality; and inasmuch as a sermon is *performed*, it faces criticism as our culture aggressively (if disingenuously) insists upon “authenticity.” Authoritative, it’s assailed as stifling and pretentious. Really, many would have it shunted aside altogether, many even in the Church—the sermon swept into the dustbin of church history.

I suppose this isn’t true of us—we who read and contribute to such a thing as *Journal for Preachers*. And yet, it should be said that preaching, though having stood the test of time, is teetering before the test of contemporary relevance. I mean, no one believes in the “sage on the stage” anymore.

The room in which I tend to preach makes such criticism even more immediate. Don’t get me wrong: I love my sanctuary, *our* sanctuary. Small and square, lit by natural light through tall, clear windows, there is little room for the inauthentic. No, the space here between I and thou is too thin to uphold pretense, “chancel-prancing” I once heard it called. (A woman in my congregation always notices my shoes from her pew while I stand in the pulpit, and once even noticed an outbreak of poison ivy on my ankles. A man in the congregation can, during worship, gauge the sort of week I’ve had based on how bitten are my fingernails.) A “preaching box,” our building might derogatorily be described, and yet there’s truth to it: it carries sound, and there is little to distract the hearer from listening (except for my shoes, my fingernails). But this means that all I have to work with is words.

This is true for all of us, of course—all of us preachers of whom Barbara Brown Taylor said, “All the preacher has is words,” and so “watching a preacher climb into the pulpit is a lot like watching a tightrope walker climb onto the platform as the drumroll begins.”¹ And yet, that’s not the whole truth. No, because the quality of speech in a sermon is of a different order.

This is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer was getting at when he wrote that “the proclaimed word is not a medium of expression for something else, something which lies behind it, but rather it is the Christ himself walking through his congregation as the word.”² (So, take your time, dear preacher.)

This is also what Thomas Long was getting at when, early in his career, he wrote, “For the pastor [preparing to preach], the primary question is not ‘What shall I say?’ but ‘What do I want to happen?’”³ More recently, he claimed, “Like the risen Christ himself, preaching is a word from God’s future embarrassingly and disturbingly thrust into the present, announcing the gift of freedom in a time of captivity, the gift

of peace to a world of conflict, and joy even as the lamenting continues.”⁴

These are all writers whose books are likely on your shelves, and so I quote them here not thinking I’m telling you something new, but hoping that to hear them again is reassurance to you as it is to me.

Two others have recently joined this faithful chorus of assurance: Charles L. Campbell and Johan H. Cilliers, whose book *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly* is one I can’t shake. As they consider the odd and enduring phenomenon of preaching, they do so with one pulpit in mind: “In South Korea,” they write, “there is a remarkable place, [a sobering place], called the Reunification Observatory, which sits high upon a hill at the border between South and North Korea.”⁵ They note that “all around the military presence is palpable—training camps, uniforms, machine guns.”⁶ But also there, they write, are two large statues—one of the Buddha with his arms open in blessing and the other of Mary, her hands folded in prayer. Both face north, to North Korea, quiet witnesses to a truth not merely stifled on the other side of that absurdly drawn line, the 59th parallel, but criminalized, punishable by imprisonment or death, or death-by-imprisonment as is often the case.⁷

They continue, “A little further up the hill is a chapel, [where upon entering], you notice only one thing. The entire front of the chapel is a large, clear glass window. And through the window you see the hills of North Korea—and the DMZ, the fences, the barbed wire....”⁸ This is to say that everyone in the sanctuary has the same view as the Buddha and the Mother Mary, and perhaps more provocatively that everyone in the sanctuary joins their quiet witness, there to be seen by those whose true seeing is proscribed. “It is as if that is the point of the chapel.” And as for the pulpit, it is small and right there “in front of that window.... And every worship day the preacher stands *in between* North and South...with nothing but a Word. And he [or she] preaches as the congregation looks toward their enemies, who are also their brothers and sisters. And in that liminal space he [or she] keeps on preaching, week in and week out, though little or nothing seems to change.”⁹

The room in which I preach could hardly be further from this place; the pulpits from which most of us preach, I imagine, couldn’t be planted in more different soil. And yet I think it’s true, this which Campbell and Cilliers claim, that

Whenever we stand up to preach with nothing but a word in the midst of a world shaped by armies and weapons of mass destruction, by global technology and economy, by principalities and powers that overwhelm both by their seductiveness and their threat, [we do so with surprising power].... In the face of those structures and institutions and systems and myths and ideologies that so often hold us captive and prevent us from imagining alternatives to their deadly ways, preaching often seems like a weak and fruitless response.¹⁰

But, “Like the gospel itself, [such an apparently foolish act] interrupts and unsettles normative discourse in order to unmask the old age and to open a space where the new creation might be perceived.”¹¹

One Sunday morning a few years ago, early in Lent, following a snowstorm, our sanctuary held but three or four congregants. It was one of a handful of Sundays in my small congregation when preaching seemed simply too pretentious a prospect for

me. I teetered before the mostly empty sanctuary as we embarked on the service. We sang a hymn, though *a capella* because our accompanist hadn't come. We recited the Call to Worship and the Prayer of Invocation. And when time came for the scripture readings and sermon, I asked those gathered, "Shall I preach, or shall we do more of a Bible study or meditation?" A woman up front, after a still moment during which she probably tried to figure out which I'd prefer, gave up that game and said simply, "Please preach to us."

And so I did.

Lent

Lent as a season is a tough sell. Known as a time when you "give things up"—things like chocolate or coffee or watching TV, things those who mean to give them up tend to enjoy; known as a time for repentance-cum-penitence—a time for reflecting on your wrong-doing and swearing to do better next time; associated with such burdensome activities as confession, contrition, sacrifice, and selflessness, Lent is a tough sell. Hair shirt, anyone? You, in the cashmere sweater: yeah, I'm talking to you.

Lent during Year B is, if you ask me, all the more so. Last year, I had the pleasure of offering commentary for this publication, commentary for the Lenten readings, plump stories from John's gospel—Nicodemus and Lazarus, the woman at the well, and the man born blind, all encounters with Jesus that were both intimate and profound. Year A, I found, is something of a delight. Year B, by contrast, is more business-minded, which frankly leaves me a little cold. Indeed, the word of these six weeks is a business word just shy of contract: covenant, which, granted, is warmer in tone, but perhaps only by a couple of degrees.

Week one would have us remember the covenant God made with Noah but which was for all creation—a covenant that obliged God never to set about destroying what God had made and that obliged humanity to have dominion, an enormous responsibility, yet on the condition that this would be counter-weighted by reverence for all life.

Week two would have us consider the covenant God made with Abram, now Abraham, but which was for all his descendants—a covenant that obliged God to provide for this people prosperity, place, and faithfulness, and that obliged the people to walk with God and be blameless, which is to say neither casting blame nor defending against blame, but leaving blame out of the relating altogether.

Week three brings us to Sinai with the people Israel where God struck a covenant with Moses, but which lives on as a model for all governance of all peoples—the rule of Law. This Law would have God be faithful as this people's Lord and would have the people follow ten remarkably light commandments, these which can be said to come down to some honoring, some remembering, and some basic acts of self-restraint.

Week four has us in the wilderness with the people, whose suffering now includes serpents and the frightening potential of dying by their poisoned bite. What happens here is more confirmation than fresh covenant—Moses fashioning, with the Lord's permission, a bronze serpent to be lifted up on a pole so that those bitten may look upon it and be saved from suffering and death. It's an odd story on its own terms, one that the people Israel perhaps appropriated from a neighboring nation. But one thing it might mean is that God wants the people to be healthy.

Week five promises a radical move on God's part, a new covenant that will be *within* each person, written on the peoples' hearts. That's one way this breaks from covenantal convention. Another is this—that while this covenant requires of God forgiveness of the peoples' iniquity and remembering their sin no more, it requires of the people apparently nothing, neither teaching nor testifying, for they all shall simply know the Lord.

Week six, of course, brings us to the cross—either entering Jerusalem with Jesus if we perform the Liturgy of the Palms or enduring with Jesus his passion, if this is the Liturgy we choose. The cross is said to be the covenant by which all previous covenants are fulfilled, the cross, by which we see what God is like (forgiving, self-giving) and what God means for us to be like (forgiving, self-giving), indeed what salvation, both as a means and as an end, is like: forgiveness, reconciliation, peace. I'll admit that the concept of covenant has me slow to come around. Though it is arguably the “governing idea of the Bible,”¹² though it is certainly the governing idea of Lent, Year B, it's a concept that has only rarely captured my faith-imagination or had me feeling closer to God—rarely until now.

A covenant is, of course, a contract of mutual accountability. It arose in the ancient world—two main types, one between parties equal in power and one between a sovereign and a group of far lesser power. And while it's true that these were largely understood as contracts among peoples and kingdoms, they found their way into the biblical imagination so to conceive of how God might relate to humanity.

Max L. Stackhouse, in his book *Globalization and Grace*, explores covenant as a notion that could be useful in humanity's move from nationalism to globalism. He notes that such covenantal relating formed a structure for the exercising of power that was about mutual obligation rather than coercion or force,¹³ and “a structured accountability that was intended to help all people to deal with one another.”¹⁴ What's more, it was applicable in many relational contexts: “God-human, sovereign-citizen, group-group, . . . friend-friend . . . , [And as such, it bound] persons who were once strangers to new responsibilities and opportunities for reasonable, freely chosen affective associations.”¹⁵

Yes, I'll admit that talk of covenant has often left me cold. But, listen: I suspect “freely-chosen affective associations” is simply a more intellectual way of saying “love,” and I suspect “structured accountability” and “mutual obligation” are simply more pragmatic ways of saying “I love you.”

I remember the first time “accountability” arose—the word and concept—in my relationship with my congregation. At my first annual meeting, fourteen years ago now, the moderator wondered how we might make accountability part of our equation: how would the congregation hold me accountable to my call?

This might strike some as funny—those congregations and their pastors for whom accountability is written right into the contract. But mine, as I've indicated, is a tiny church in a small town, so this level of formality was new or at least was newly awoken. And, to be honest, it offended me. Young and uppity, I wanted no part of “accountability.” I wanted to be accountable to no one and nothing except to God. Couldn't I be trusted just to do my job? Couldn't I be trusted just to do what's right?

Over a decade later now, I want very much to be accountable to them—for us all to be accountable, obligated to one another. I want us to have enough reverence for what we're doing together so as to be covenantal about it all. Indeed, it's one of my

aims in their regard: to leave this tiny congregation with such a sense of import and purpose that they might engage their next pastor intentionally in covenant as they have come to do with me. Yes, this is the lesson that I mean to leave them with. But, having said that, I do hope they're slow learners.

2015

I cannot claim to be a prognosticator when it comes to the challenges that 2015 will bring. I have no secret knowledge and no greater even public knowledge than any other preacher out there. I read the newspaper—or as much of it as I can get to. I listen to NPR and various news podcasts. I am equal parts enlightened about and mystified by the world around me. That said, I trust that the riches of scripture, preaching, and worship can ransom current events from the maw of nihilism that threatens and enthralls. This trust, however, presents as open-ended, as questions that we preachers might use Lent 2015 to answer.

One challenge that I imagine will continue into 2015 (and well beyond!) is the crisis of climate change and all that it entails. 2013 saw carbon emissions rise at a record pace. The oceans are acidifying at the fastest rate in 300 million years due to carbon emissions from human civilization. A study by the Audubon Society of America reveals that 40 percent of bird species could be extinct by 2100 because of global warming. These are three headlines on the website *Vox* right now.

Surely, the covenant that we enjoy with God through Noah has something to speak to us now. So I wonder what word we preachers might offer on the first Sunday of Lent in this regard—what word of reverence for all life and self-restraint for common good, what word of mutual obligation and hopeful forward-looking, we might utter in the conviction that this word will have enduring effect.

Another challenge that I imagine will yet be with us is the crisis in the Middle East—in Iraq and Syria, in Israel/Palestine, and in American foreign policy as regards this fraught region. ISIS (or ISIL or Islamic State) has revealed itself to have great ambition with their expansionist Islamist ideology. Syria is an unstable and brutal place under Assad's terrorizing leadership, which only looks good when compared to ISIS. Israel/Palestine heats up and cools down, and people die and people die; but these two neighboring relatives can't seem to settle into common cause. The US, for its part, is the greatest military power in the world, and yet is largely impotent in this.

Surely, the covenant that God established through Abraham to all who would be Abraham's offspring has something to speak to us now, something of living free of blame, neither casting it nor participating in it nor defending against it. So I wonder what word we preachers might offer that would witness to the possibilities of forgiveness amidst a region roiling with blame, resentment, and war.

Still another challenge that will abide into 2015 is the racism that yet casts a dreadful and shameful pall over American society. The events in Ferguson, Missouri, are fresh yet fading as I write this—a crisis that is an opportunity for us, yet one that we might collectively not pursue. Michael Brown is dead, and nothing will change that, and we should be loath to justify it with good intentions now. Thinking more generally, I believe the grip of white power and privilege will be nearly impossible to loosen. Really, only the good news of love, the good news to be found in mutual obligation, truly the joy to be found in love of the stranger in your midst, I suspect,

will accomplish that. Only this will inspire white culture to submit its sometimes aggressive dominance to the mercy of the black (and brown) citizens who've lived and sometimes thrived, but more often suffered amidst such gripping dominance.

Surely, the covenant that God established through Moses for governance that imagines all people as equal under the Law has something to speak to us now. So I wonder what word of blessed obligation any of us might utter, what vision of justice we might put forth. I wonder what word you might let live in your sanctuary and walk amidst your congregation that it might succeed in the thing to which you, by God's power and spirit, set forth.

The fourth week of Lent seems a good time to think about access to healthcare in our society, which is a more complicated thing than the partisan bickering would have us think. Our population is aging; the cost of healthcare is rising, in part because of more effective, though costlier, treatments. Providers are tending to specialties that pay well because healthcare as a private enterprise is expensive to get into. But as a public enterprise it gets bogged down in political fights as to what sorts of treatments are acceptable, justifiable, appropriate. In sum, it's a mess, and we do little good in preaching of complex problems as if they were easy and we (alone) knew the right way through.

However, this we do know, and from the confirmation offered in the desert: that God means for God's people to be healthy and moreover to enjoy equal access to what gives health. Surely then, thinking in terms of covenant could be of help here. Thinking, and then preaching, in terms of structured accountability for the purpose of love manifest, could unleash a much needed spirit of active good will.

This is quite an agenda, I realize, exhausting but not exhaustive. Really, I hardly expect any one congregation to get all of this. The truth is, I'm rarely so activist a preacher myself. My congregational context determines this to some degree; why lay on these thirty people the massive problems of the world week after week? But there's also the fact that I do wonder how effective human activism is at achieving God's goal. Are we essential, instrumental, or superfluous in God's working justice and peace into God's creation, that the kingdom might come, that all might be made new?¹⁶ The covenant the Lord promised through Jeremiah speaks to this question. Here, God alone is active; here, God alone is obliged. Nothing is required of us, nothing in demand: the Law of God will simply be written on our hearts.

The covenant of the cross only deepens the question. It's the old atonement puzzle, you'll remember it from your ordination paper or your ecclesiastical council or your denominational equivalent of these. Does the crucifixion accomplish atonement or does it reveal and lead us in the way of atonement? Does Christ on the cross win us salvation or teach us how to live—cruciform, self-restraining and self-giving—that salvation might be ours, in history and in eternity? Does Jesus' submission to the principalities of this age and the powers of death introduce something new of God into human history or reveal something of God that has ever been and ever will be active?

I don't know the answer to these, but I do like the questions. What's more, I like the invitation and the assurance that I might work for God's purpose, though if I don't or can't, then that will hardly thwart God's victory in history and in eternity, today and forever—the triumph of peace, justice, truth, and love. Truly, this, unlike coercion or force, motivates me to pray and to preach that we all might set ourselves

to God's good purpose in freedom and joy, in thanks and praise.

Preaching during Lent in 2015 might guide us on this grand journey, a journey that perhaps begins with the suspicion that the cost of true living is just too high and that ends with the revelation that there is hardly a greater joy than "structured accountability" and "mutual obligation." The Bible, as we've seen, calls such things covenant and shows them as given for the sake that all might have life and have it in abundance. Jesus called it Love, a Law that is indeed written on our hearts and yet also one in whose hope of fulfillment we preach and teach so as to realize that Love in our every day.

God's grace to you, dear preacher. May your words live amidst your congregation by the power of the Holy Spirit that God's truth might be known, Jesus' presence might be felt, and the good news of self-giving love might give form to the lives of the people who receive of your foolish preaching, your faithful offering. It's not much, but it'll do.

Notes

- 1 Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1993), 76.
- 2 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Proclaimed Word," in *The Company of Preachers: Wisdom on Preaching from Augustine to the Present*, edited by Richard Lischer (Grand Rapids, MI: William R. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 34.
- 3 Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 32.
- 4 Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009), 124.
- 5 Charles L. Campbell and Johan H. Cilliers, *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 126.
- 6 Campbell and Cilliers, 126.
- 7 As I write this, three Americans have recently been sentenced to hard labor in North Korea, one for allegedly leaving a Bible in a public place.
- 8 Campbell and Cilliers, 126.
- 9 Campbell and Cilliers, 126.
- 10 Campbell and Cilliers, 18.
- 11 Campbell and Cilliers, 216.
- 12 Max L. Stackhouse, *God and Globalization, Vol. 4: Globalization and Grace* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 163.
- 13 Stackhouse, 163.
- 14 Stackhouse, 162.
- 15 Stackhouse, 164.
- 16 Thomas Long is helpful here in urging preachers to engage in eschatological preaching, this which "promises a 'new heaven and a new earth' and invites people to participate in a coming future that, while it is not dependent upon their success, is open to the labor of their hands." (Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, 125.)