Preaching Scripture Faithfully

BY CHRISTINE T. McSPADDEN

How can we preach and hear Scripture faithfully in today's post-imperial-Christian, relativistic, poly-vocal milieu? Despite the challenges, we can appropriate the sacred texts in a refreshed way that allows the power of God's Word to transfigure, convert, and create.

As an art director on Madison Avenue, my job involved presenting to clients and selling them on products, concepts, and ideas. Much like Don Draper of *Mad Men* fame, I was charged with crafting a cohesive message and then communicating that message in a creative and compelling way that could be heard in the vernacular of my audience, in order to convert perspectives and ignite desires.

Hundreds of pitches honed my skills. Hours of public speaking steeled my nerves. But the first time I climbed the stairs of a pulpit to preach a sermon, my knees buckled, my heart raced, my hands perspired, and my confidence flagged. Up to this point, my presentations espoused the advantages of whitening agents and moisturizing compounds, credit card acceptance and softness assurance. Never had the stakes been so high as when I mounted those steps to proclaim Christ crucified and risen, who was, and is, and will be forever. More absorbent diapers or age-defying micro beads had nothing on the power of the living God to heal, reconcile, enliven, and transform. Given the privilege to preach, entrusted to proclaim the Word of God, I found myself awestruck by the task.

Twenty years later, I find myself no less daunted by this vocational prerogative. But now having preached hundreds of sermons, in a variety of settings, I trust that God's Word will work in and through me to deliver good news to those hungry to hear it.

Why do I believe this? What tenets, doctrines, and theology inform my resolve? How do I face this audacious homiletic task without crumbling under its magnitude? This article probes these questions.

Aimed at the preacher and the active listener, I hope to deepen a sense of participation in the project of preaching. Drawing a distinction between the art of marketing and the power of proclaiming the gospel, I open a conversation about what it means to preach and hear Scripture faithfully in today's post-imperial-Christian, relativistic, poly-vocal milieu. Acknowledging that there are barriers and challenges to preaching Scripture faithfully in this contemporary milieu, I present strategies for the preacher and oratory audience to guide interpretation and reception of Scripture in worship. Finally, in proposing an ethos of preaching and the role of the sermon, I hope to embolden the reader to appropriate the sacred texts of the Old and New Testaments in a refreshed way with greater expectation in the power of God's Word to transfigure, convert, and create.

PARTICIPATING IN THE PROJECT OF PREACHING

Even though advertising tells a story to convert—a shared goal with sermons—the project of preaching possesses marked differences. Where the marketing pitch lulls consumers by selling an attractive reality, preaching equips disciples, awakening in them skills of discernment. It activates sensibilities to new realities—some of those realities initially *un*attractive.

At its heart, preaching is a conversation. While in most cases one person may be doing the talking, those receiving the talking engage in the varied responses of acceptance, refusal, interpretation, and integration. Preaching acts as a conversation because it anticipates, it expects response. The homiletic conversation operates on several levels: preacher with scriptural text, preacher with congregation, congregation with preacher, and, in the case of what I would call a "good" sermon, congregation with scriptural text.

I define the so-called good sermon as one that sends the hearer back to the text—the revelation of the Word. With a steady diet of good preaching, hearers should want to read the Bible, dig in, looking for more. In the Christian community, the scriptural texts of the Old and New Testaments provide the only sustained and mutually accepted account of God. The two testaments act, and have acted throughout the history of the worshiping community, as the *sine qua non* Source. Good preaching, then, encourages its hearers to return to that source, to look *at* it and *in* it anew with curiosity and expectation. Good preaching points not to itself, or its orator, but to the Holy One revealed in Scripture—in the gospel or "good news."

In my use of the terms gospel and good news I draw on Martin Luther's understanding of the entire canon encompassing Old and New Testaments. More specifically, I look to the first verse of the Gospel of Mark to elucidate the term good news (*euangelion*): "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."[1]

In the very first verse of the Gospel of Mark, the evangelist lays out his project. He reveals the provenance of his faith claims by connecting the good news to the beginning, Genesis 1:1-2, when God created out of the chaos, the *tohu va bohu*. He grounds the authority of the good news in the authority of Hebrew prophecy and Torah, identifying Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, the awaited anointed one, and as the Son of God, the beloved, the only one.

Additionally, in a deft move of grammatical tense and layered meaning, the evangelist accretes double meaning to the term good news with both the characteristics of a noun and a verb. As a noun, the good news represents the transforming, salvific gospel Jesus proclaims through word and deed. Likewise, God's righteous purposes for Israel, reach both climax and consummation in and through the active ministry and en-fleshed person of Jesus; Jesus is the good news incarnate. Animated as a verb, the good news happens in the proclamation of Jesus and, by extension, his followers. In this sense, Jesus does not merely proclaim the dawning of the reign of God but extends the invitation for fidelity to himself as the instrument ordained to inaugurate the reign of God. Intrinsically in the text, Mark enlivens this claim about the dynamic nature of the good news.

In this two-fold way, the proclamation speaks down through the ages by virtue of sharing the living text. The Evangelist draws parallels between the first disciples' experience and the dynamics one might face today in choosing to follow Jesus, thereby inviting the reader into the story with a sense of agency and urgency. Mark's narrative connects the contemporary reader to the long-awaited proclamation and eschatological choice for, and hope in, the living Christ.

WORKING WITH DIFFICULT TEXTS

> Preaching is a conversation that operates on several levels: preacher with scriptural text, preacher with congregation, congregation with preacher, and, in the case of a "good" sermon, congregation with scriptural text.

But what does one do when that scriptural revelation of the Holy One looks less than attractive? How does one deal with those so-called "difficult" texts encountered during lectionary-based worship—texts all too lacking in marketable appeal? How does the preacher put the alluring lipstick on the pig of a prickly passage from the pulpit?

Without question there are barriers to preaching Scripture faithfully and robustly in our contemporary culture. It is tempting to neglect or domesticate passages that challenge the status quo. Yet because that is exactly what those texts should do, preachers must resist the temptation. Typically, the

sermon reaches the largest audience in a congregation, providing the most efficient venue for exposition, pastoral care, and connection to sacred Scripture. In my experience, congregations want their preachers to take on these difficult texts, to wrestle with them, to explicate them on their own terms, and to connect them to real life lived now. Precisely because of their strangeness, unexpectedness, and even offensiveness, they possess the power to challenge, surprise, confront, and transfigure those primed to hear them.

So to help the good news be heard, I present four moves the preacher can make with the text to allow it to speak on its own terms with a challenging and relevant word. These "hermeneutics," or methods of interpretation, provide lenses through which texts might be read, interpreted, and mined for refreshed perspectives.

EMPLOYING THE FOUR-FOLD SENSE OF SCRIPTURE

The rise of Fundamentalism in all three Abrahamic faiths has misled some to believe that there is one, literal way to read Scripture—a singular way that has been there, fundamentally, since the beginning. But the rise of Fundamentalism is a new phenomenon. Burgeoning in the latter half of the nineteenth century in a post-industrial milieu of anxiety and coming to full fruition after the emotional and institutional upheaval following World War II, Fundamentalism—with its strict adherence to univocal scriptural reading—completely defies the long tradition of scriptural study in the Church and the very nature of the biblical text to criticize, revise, and comment upon itself.

From its inception, the Church has boasted a rich tradition of interpreting sacred Scripture; persistently, the biblical texts have been read, marked, and inwardly digested with an intellectual curiosity and scrutiny. The Gospels constantly recast Old Testament witness in light of the Resurrection; Paul consistently draws analogies between texts. Jesus himself illumines the holy writ in new ways.

The tradition of interpretation developed further during the Patristic period. The church doctor Augustine, taking cues from his mentor Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, outlined an ethical stance to reading Scripture, affirming that all texts bear the good news and it is the reader's vocation to keep at prayer and study until that goodness of the news reveals itself. He starts from the conviction that if one has not apprehended the good news, they need to go back into Scripture again, for it is not the text that is wanting.[2]

Methods of interpretation flourished in the Middle Ages, in particular with the *Quadriga* or the four-fold sense of Scripture. With this discipline, each text is mined for four levels of varied meaning: the literal sense (*sensus historicus*), the allegorical sense (*sensus allegoricus*), the moral or tropological sense (*sensus tropologicus* or *sensus moralis*), and the anagogical or future sense (*sensus anagogicus*).[3]

First, the literal sense denotes what the passage says at face value, what it reports or states directly given its grammatical, etymological, historical constitution. To parse the literal sense, one might employ a wealth of study tools such as grammatical aids, archaeological evidence, historical and literary analyses, and sociological and anthropological studies. With a host of commentaries available in print and online, it is easier than ever to call up articles of rigorous, in-depth scholarship to help locate the text within an historical-critical framework, to trace the meanings and usage of words and phrases through the centuries, to mine grammatical constructions. Reading more than one commentary broadens the conversation with the text. Finding opposing views, bringing them into the conversation, and noting what is at stake in the differing opinions takes study one step better. Why do their differences matter and why might those differences matter to your congregation?

Second, the allegorical sense indicates what the passage means in light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, church doctrine, and the rule of faith. The rule of faith is the constellation of faith claims made by early followers of the new Way engendered by Jesus of Nazareth. Over time, the discipleship community distilled and shaped these faith claims into creedal formulas (in particular the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed). Often the allegorical sense renders a Christocentric, symbolic reading layered upon pre- or non-Christian texts.

Third, the moral sense suggests what the passage can teach one about how to live. It challenges one's worldview, gives guidance, and models ethical response. Fourth, the anagogical sense teases out an eschatological, metaphysical meaning concerned with last things, consummation, and ultimacy.[4]

The Church boasts a rich tradition of interpreting Scripture. In the Middle Ages, each text was mined for four levels of meaning: the literal sense, the allegorical sense, the moral or tropological sense, and the anagogical or future sense.

CONSIDERING THE TEXT WITHIN ITS CANONICAL CONTEXT

Canonical criticism represents a post-critical hermeneutic that looks at the meaning the final form of a text has for the community that uses it. As a student of Brevard Childs (even though he has rejected the term "canonical criticism"), I remain swayed by his argument for the importance of considering any particular text within the wider context of the entire canon—the outer boundaries of authoritative Scripture. As such, the canon "forms a prism through which light from the different aspects of the Christian life is refracted."[5]

Maintaining the contours of the canon, each excerpted text stands not in isolation but in relationship to the weighted witness of the corpus of sacred Scripture. By weighted witness, I imply that each excerpt must also be considered in comparison with its place and significance within the overall proportion and weighted emphases of the canon.

PROBLEMATIZING THE HERMENEUTIC OF SUSPICION

Contemporary readings of Scripture often approach biblical texts with a hermeneutic of suspicion. Appropriating meaning from this stance often involves starting with one's self-defined experience as, for example, feminist, womanist, queer, non-Western, or in some significant way, marginalized. Sacred Scripture is then scrutinized with an eye toward recasting or even removing passages that veer from ideological critique. These particular readings prove invaluable in expanding the conversation to include new and heretofore unheard voices. Yet, while I believe forcefully that the text should never stand beyond suspicion or critique, that it indeed should be able to withstand the most rigorous of scrutiny, discounting the authority of troubling texts robs them of their ability to challenge, surprise, and freshen dearly-held perspectives.

Instead of defaulting to a hermeneutic of suspicion, we should approach difficult texts with a "hermeneutic of trust"[6] or a "hermeneutic of consent."[7] A hermeneutic of trust or consent involves approaching the biblical witness with an attitude of prayer and worship, and a humble willingness to hear the otherness of the text while suspending one's own inner critic. Such an interpretive framework accords sacred writing the benefit of the doubt: it acknowledges that the text has had something to say to followers for millennia and might have something authentic to say now. It invokes the doctrine of divine inspiration that encourages an attitude of openness and vulnerability to transformation by the Word and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Often, just as valuable as listening to what a text is saying on its own terms, is the practice of listening to what it is not saying. For example, in the story of Jephthah's daughter (Judges 11) a first reading might cast the passage as one that condones violence against women. Yet upon closer reading, it acts as a damning commentary on the arrogance and apostasy of its male protagonist Jephthah. Jephthah makes his pact with God to offer a sacrifice if he is victorious in battle against the Ammonites. Tragically, he ends up sacrificing his beloved and only daughter. Missing from the story is God's acknowledgement or acceptance of Jephthah's terms. Yes, Jephthah prevails, but it could be argued that he negotiated the bargain with himself, without God's blessing. Read this way, an ancient "blood" text that prefigures the sacrifice of Jesus, comes to the same condemning conclusion: people get swept up in their own machinations and act abominably, knowing not what they are doing.

APPROACHING THE BIBLE AS A LIVING TEXT

While the content of the Bible is fixed—the canon as it currently stands is closed[8]—what might be gleaned from that unchanging document is infinitely rich, abundantly varied, and utterly inexhaustible. We attend not only to what the text meant in a past community, but also to what the text has to say for the present believing community. Dialectically, we shuttle between the literal and spiritual senses of the text in the effort to appropriate what God's Word has to say today. The doctrine of divine inspiration holds that sacred Scripture not only was composed and edited under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but also continues to be interpreted and appropriated under that same divine guidance. With the Bible, we deal with a living text that continues to have meaning for the faith communities that hold it sacred.

RELAXING INTO THE MYSTERY OF GOD

I asked a group of people in the congregation I currently serve what they find most helpful in approaching hard texts and what they want from their preachers. In teasing out their answers, they outlined the strategies above. They appreciate when the preacher goes into these texts, wrestles with them, and does not avoid them. They noted that when the preacher exercises this tenacity and brings it to the pulpit, they participate with the preacher in interpretation.

When preachers open themselves to transformation by the biblical witness, undoubtedly they will deliver sermons that invite hearers to do the same. An authentic conversation through preaching builds tolerance for mystery and for the unresolved. Building this tolerance encourages the same in relationships, so that members deepen the ability and courage to meet and apprehend the wholeness of each other, however different or foreign that might be. In essence, the four relationships identified earlier—preacher to scriptural text, preacher to congregation, congregation to preacher, and congregation to scriptural text—become more hospitable. A hermeneutic of welcome operates alongside a hermeneutics of trust and consent.

> We should approach difficult texts with a "hermeneutic of trust" or "hermeneutic of consent." This involves an attitude of prayer and worship, and a humble willingness to hear the otherness of the text while suspending one's own inner critic.

Dealing with hard texts with a congregation extends the invitation to take on a new ethic, one marked by the kingdom of God. Preaching that

aims to illumine the breadth of the canon of Scripture connects to the power to transform the receiver's perspective, so that one wishes to transform self, relationships, and the world in ways that more closely align with the expectations, ethos, hope, and glorious vision of the kingdom of God. Preaching, then, forms the hearer, improving their interpretive skills. And finally, preaching persuades the listener that the Bible manifests resources for our daily lives that far surpass any worldly or material good.

NOTES

1 The text reads "αρχη του ευαγγελιου ιησου χριστου υιου του θεου" in Stephens 1550 Textus Receptus, Scrivener 1894 Textus Receptus, and Byzantine Majority.

2 In this discussion I am referring to Augustine's discourse in *On Christian Teaching* where he encourages a figurative reading when bumping into morally troubling portions of the Old Testament—for example, his statement that "anything in the divine discourse that cannot be related either to good morals or to the true faith should be taken as figurative" (*On Christian Teaching*, 3.10.14). This hermeneutic is shaped by his longer view that ethics involves the pursuit of the supreme good by loving the right objects—those that are worthy of our love—in the right way, leading to the true happiness that all humans seek.

3 The fourfold sense of Scripture was first proposed by John Cassian (ca. 360-435).

4 A cursory example of using the fourfold sense to parse the Israelites crossing of the Red Sea might go something like this: A literal reading would deal with the importance of the story for Israel's deliverance. It might ask logistical questions like "Was the Red Sea really a 'reed' sea, shallow and marshy?" or "Historically, what transpired when Moses and Israel crossed the sea?" Allegorically, one might wonder how the crossing represents baptism and new life, repentance and being washed clean. Morally, one might reflect on what it says about deliverance from oppressive forces, how one crosses over hardship in search of a promised land. Eschatologically, one might ask what the story anticipates about the passage from death into eternal life.

5 Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 672.

6 Richard B. Hays introduces the idea of a "hermeneutic of trust" in "Salvation by Trust? Reading the Bible Faithfully," *The Christian Century* (February 26, 1997), 218-223.

7 Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Toward a Hermeneutic of Consent*, translated by Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1977).

8 While an argument could be made that the canon, theoretically, remains open, in practice the Church regards the canon as closed—books cannot be added or removed—reflecting the doctrine that public revelation has ended. For an explication of the term canon, see Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

CHRISTINE T. McSPADDEN
is Associate Rector of the Episcopal Church of St. Mary the Virgin in San Francisco, California.