



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Articles:

- 📖 Preaching Scripture Faithfully  
(*Scripture*, pp. 47-54)

### Suggested Article:

- 📖 Embodying Scripture through Performative Interpretation  
(*Scripture*, pp. 74-77)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

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# Preaching Scripture Faithfully

How can we preach and hear difficult passages of Scripture faithfully? 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.

### Responsive Prayer

Lord, your word is both a wound for us and a balm.

**With it you pierce our pride and our illusions of self-sufficiency.**

We need every word you will speak to us.

**We need the words that come down through the ages to speak for us; we need the voices in the Scripture who grieve to voice our own pain; we need the stories of divine blessing to breathe purpose into our lives; we need the songs of old to draw us into their joyful refrain.**

We need your words, passed down through the ages, to understand the mystery of our God, the holy three in one.

**Heal us with a word from you, so that we may be whole.**

**Amen.**

### Scripture Reading: Ezekiel 2:1-3:3

### Reflection

Everything about Ezekiel’s calling is dramatic. God sends him to preach to a really hard audience – the “impudent and stubborn” and “rebellious” people of Israel. To prepare him, God makes Ezekiel *eat* a scroll filled with “words of lamentation and mourning and woe.” And (here’s the surprise), he finds it tasty.

Rev. Christine McSpadden’s story is not so striking. Yet she does recall that in her former job, as an art director in a Madison Avenue advertising firm, the ‘pitch’ was so much easier. “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 *unattractive*.” And so she wonders, “What does one do when that scriptural revelation of the Holy One looks less than attractive? ... How does the preacher put the alluring lipstick on the pig of a prickly passage from the pulpit?”

She has four ideas for allowing a so-called ‘difficult’ text to “speak on its own terms with a challenging and relevant word.”

- ▶ *Attend to its multiple senses.* The Church has a rich tradition of finding layers of meaning in each text, following a pattern found in Scripture itself. “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,” she notes. In the patristic and medieval eras the *Quadrigo*, or four-fold sense, arose. “With this discipline, each text is mined for four levels of varied meaning: the literal sense, the allegorical sense, the moral or tropological sense, and the anagogical or future sense.”
- ▶ *Interpret it in canonical context.* Reading a text in light of the entire biblical narrative highlights its role in the worshiping community



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that gave it final form. The text's meaning contributes to and in turn is shaped by the "weighted witness" of the whole of Scripture.

- ▶ *Use a hermeneutic of trust or consent.* Rather than grading each passage according to one's ideological stance (e.g., a feminist, womanist, queer, non-Western, or in some significant way, marginalized perspective), McSpadden urges us to approach the Bible "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."
- ▶ *Read it as a living text.* "What can be gleaned from [the Bible] is infinitely rich, abundantly varied, and utterly inexhaustible. 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."

"Dealing with hard texts with a congregation extends the invitation to take on a new ethic, one marked by the kingdom of God," McSpadden concludes. By improving their interpretive skills, such study of Scripture "persuades the listener that the Bible manifests resources for our daily lives that far surpass any worldly or material good."

### Study Questions

1. Review the four levels of meaning of the *Quadrige*, or four fold sense of Scripture. Which levels of meaning have been the foci of your Bible study? Why is each level important for a Christian interpreter?
2. Consider how the doctrine of divine inspiration undergirds each of Christine McSpadden's suggestions.
3. What sort of biblical texts are 'difficult' for you? How could McSpadden's suggestions help you interpret them?
4. For Kathy Maxwell, why is it valuable to internalize and perform Scripture in the context of teaching and preaching?

### Departing Hymn: "The Heavens Declare Your Glory, Lord" (vv. 1 and 5)

The heav'ns declare your glory, Lord;  
in every star your wisdom shines;  
but when our eyes behold your Word,  
we read your name in fairer lines.

Great Sun of Righteousness, arise!  
Bless the dark world with heav'nly light,  
Your gospel makes the simple wise;  
your laws are pure, your judgments right.

Isaac Watts (1719), alt.

Suggested Tunes: CANONBURY or HEBRON

# Preaching Scripture Faithfully

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To understand preaching as a multi-level conversation.
2. To outline strategies for preaching and teaching the so-called ‘difficult’ biblical texts – those that are difficult to understand or are unattractive to modern sensibilities.
3. To consider why is it valuable to internalize and perform Scripture in the context of teaching and preaching.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Scripture (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “The Heavens Declare Your Glory, Lord” locate one of the familiar tunes CANONBURY or HEBRON in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)).

## Begin with a Story

Christine McSpadden remembers how frightened she was twenty years ago when she preached her first sermon. She was not afraid of speaking before a daunting audience, because she had plenty of experience. “As an art director on Madison Avenue, my job involved presenting to clients and selling them on products, concepts, and ideas,” she recalls. “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.”

McSpadden is still awestruck by the task of preaching, but she trusts “that God’s Word will work in and through me to deliver good news to those hungry to hear it.” (*Scripture*, 47)

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by inviting members to read responsively the prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Ezekiel 2:1-3:3 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

The theological interpretation of Scripture, which is the focus of these study guides, bears additional practical fruit in this lesson. We see how Christine McSpadden employs it in her preaching to shed light on the so-called ‘difficult’ biblical texts, and how Kathy Maxwell uses it to bring Scripture alive through performance in her

teaching. Another theme that runs through McSpadden and Maxwell's articles is that preaching or teaching Scripture is a multi-level conversation: of the preacher/teacher with Scripture, of the preacher/teacher with listeners, of listeners with the preacher/teacher, and (when it is a "good" sermon or lesson) of listeners with Scripture. Let this insight guide your teaching and inspire your group members.

### *Study Questions*

1. Christine McSpadden explains: "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." Most commentaries offer interpretations in this literal sense.  
"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." It may include "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, models ethical response. Fourth, the anagogical sense teases out an eschatological, metaphysical meaning concerned with last things, consummation, and ultimacy."  
Here is her example of interpreting the Israelites crossing of the Red Sea. "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."
2. McSpadden invokes the doctrine of divine inspiration in regard to the last two suggestions: we can read the Bible with a hermeneutic of trust or consent, and believe Scripture is a living text with a word for our faith community because we are confident that the Holy Spirit is working through the written word to reveal Christ and transform our lives. The doctrine also undergirds the other suggestions. The allegorical, moral, and anagogical meanings of particular texts often go beyond what the human writers understood and intended to say about the figures and events they are describing; they become clear in light of later actions by God and we are guided to understand them by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2). Also, the formation of the canon of Scripture occurred through a long process of discernment in the Church guided by the Spirit.
3. Encourage members to make a list of texts that are difficult for them. McSpadden identifies the "texts encountered during lectionary-based worship ... [that are] all too lacking in marketable appeal." These might include challenging teachings by Jesus, the role of women in the biblical narrative, and apocalyptic prophecies. Beyond the lectionary are many other 'difficult' passages including stories or psalms of great violence (she mentions the story of Jephthah in Judges 8), ceremonial laws in the Old Testament, teachings about sexual purity, and parts of the wisdom literature. Of course, she does not claim that the four interpretive strategies will remove all of our difficulties quickly (or, in some cases, at all), but that they are time-honored ways of struggling more carefully with these difficult texts.
4. Kathy Maxwell performs Scripture with her faculty colleagues and assigns performance to her college students. She identifies several benefits. Performing Scripture requires the interpreter to study the text carefully in light of the larger biblical narrative; she reports that she must put herself "into the sandals of the people I am embodying, guided and informed by the story's historical and literary context." Furthermore, performance "is an effective way to communicate multiple layers of interpretation" to an audience. It engages the audience to interact with the figures in the biblical narrative. And it presents Scripture without tying up all the interpretive loose ends, which "gives Scripture freedom to work in the lives of the hearers in refreshing and unexpected ways." If your group would like to perform Scripture, contact Kathy Maxwell for guidance on selecting texts and preparing for the performance.

### *Departing Hymn*

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.